The Dragon & the Hummingbird

A not-for-profit allegory for our times

by *Gramskii*

illustrations by *Taz*

The Dragon & the Hummingbird

By Gramskii (Graham Hall)
Illustrations by Taz (Paul Taylor)

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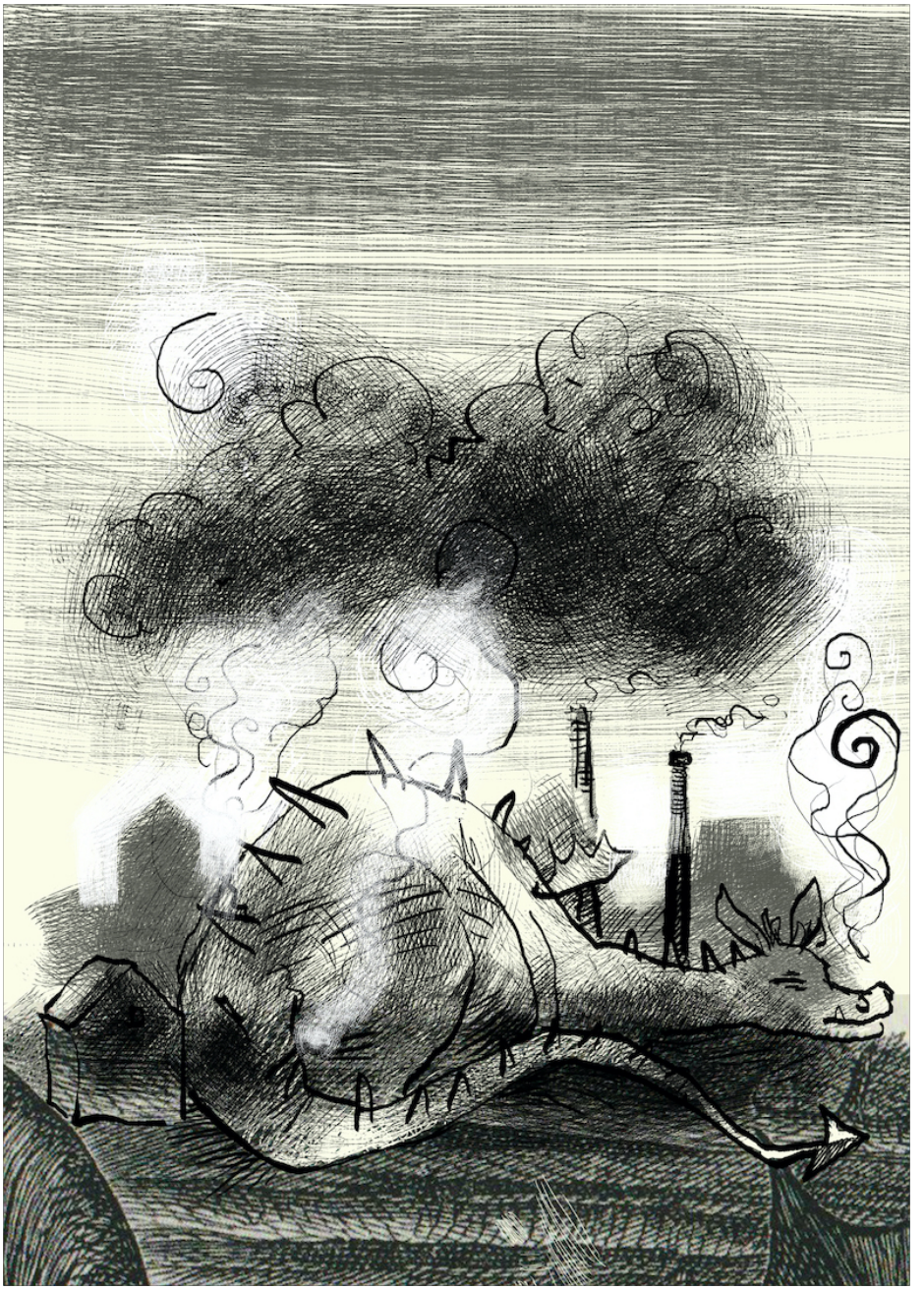
FOR

Sarah, Stan, Mack & Sydney



Contents

THANKS 11

PART ONE: THE DRAGON 13

— an ALLEGORY 13

PART TWO: THE HUMMINGBIRD 52

— an EXPLAINER 52

1: THE WRAP PARTY – WHAT'S GOING ON? 53

2: TWICKENHAM TO KEW – DAZED AND CONFUSED 75

3: KEW TO HAMMERSMITH – DIRTY WORK 121

4: HAMMERSMITH TO BATTERSEA – WALK ON BY 152

5: LATE–NIGHT MEAL – CAN'T GET NO SATISFACTION 178

6: THE NIGHTCAP PT.1 – CH–CH–CH–CH–CHANGES... 193

7: THE NIGHTCAP PT.2 – ALL THINGS MUST PASS 243

8: THE ELEVATOR PITCH – MOVE ON UP 283

ABOUT GRAMSKII 321

ILLUSTRATIONS 323

"Better humour them" He thought, ushering them in

Fairy tales do not tell children that dragons exist. Children already know this. Fairy tales tell children that dragons can be killed.
G. K. Chesterton

You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete.
Buckminster Fuller

There can be only one permanent revolution — a moral one: the regeneration of the inner man. How is this revolution to take place? Nobody knows, but every man feels it clearly in himself. And yet, in our world, everybody thinks of changing humanity, and nobody thinks of changing himself.
Leo Tolstoy

THANKS

Thanks to my wife **Sarah** for helping to finance this project, believing it was worth doing, and believing that I could do it!
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If you like Paul's illustrations and want to commission him for something of your own, you can contact him here: *EnglishPastoral@gmail*

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who read early drafts
and offered advice and encouragement

Thanks, everyone!

Part One: THE DRAGON

— *an* ALLEGORY

Alice tries to "do her bit"

1. ALICE'S ADVENTURES

This is Alice. Alice is a terrific human being.

There was a time when she didn't have a care in the world — with her pink hair and nose stud. But these days, she's settled into a more conventional lifestyle, playing happy families with a lovely husband and two naughty but adorable daughters in a charming little cottage on a quiet street in a friendly little town.

At least, it *used* to be a friendly little place to live. But recently, she's noticed her world is changing — and not for the better. For instance, she no longer hears the dawn chorus when she wakes up early, and she's pretty sure there are fewer butterflies and bees pollinating the flowers in her garden. Don't get her started on the crazy weather ruining her tomato plants. And all this makes her worry about the future and the kind of world her daughters will grow up in.

To help the planet, she's become a vegetarian and buys most of her clothes in second-hand shops. She's even bought a second-hand electric car, because they're supposed to be better and less polluting. Still, even *that's* complicated, and now she's worrying about the minerals they dig out of the ground to make the batteries. She's heard they might be using child labour to do that.

It's all very confusing and frustrating.

So now she's taken to going on climate marches, even if she's not sure it makes much of a difference. But it helps lower her anxiety levels — and in any case, what else can she do?

Alice sometimes pulls his leg about being classic "middle management"

2. INCURIOUS GEORGE

This is George. He's known Alice all his life, and they're best friends.

They grew up together, went to school together, worked together at the same factory, and now even live next door to each other.

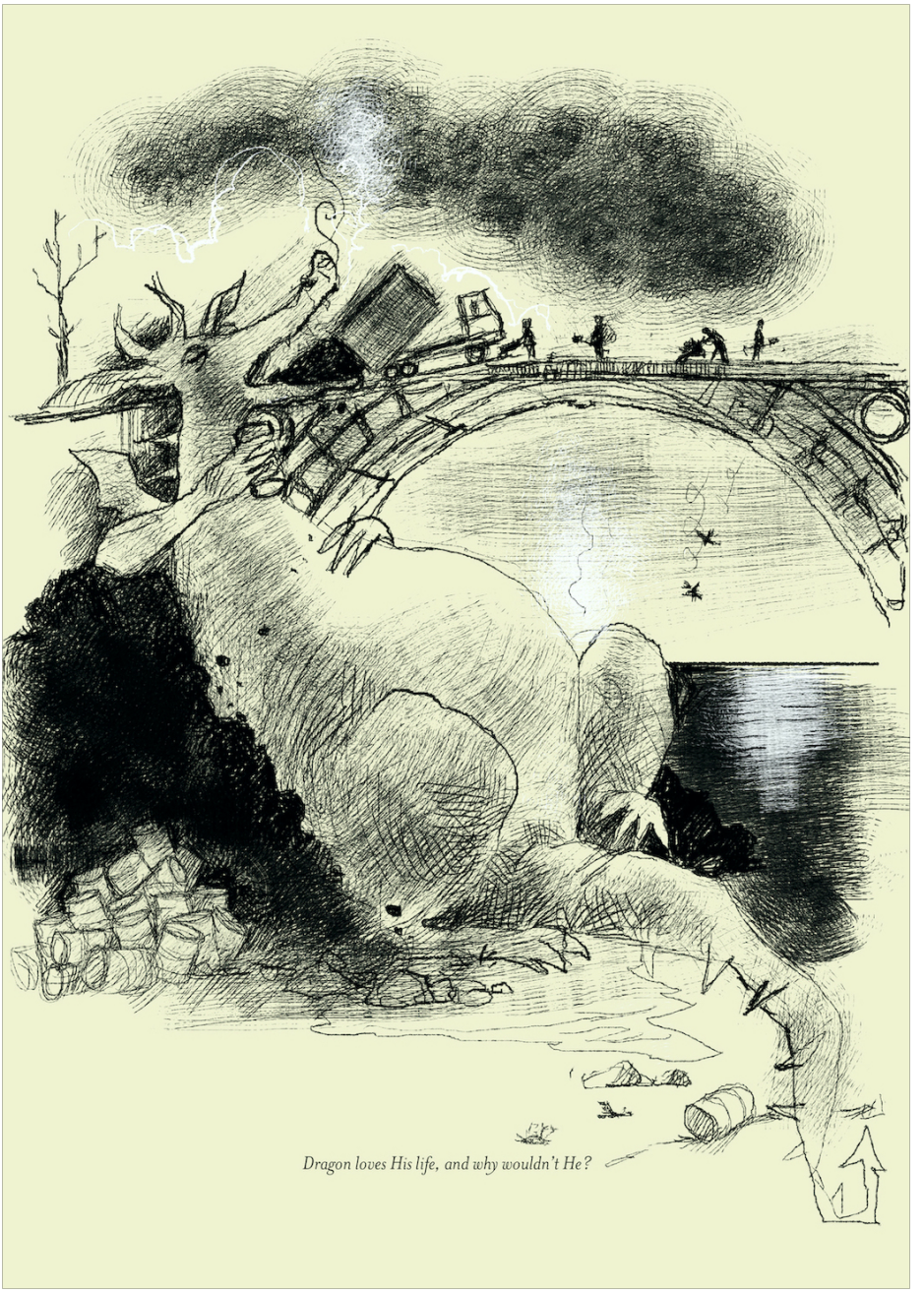
But unlike Alice, George isn't all that concerned about the climate. He's got a bigger house and a flashier car than Alice, and he takes his family on more exotic holidays. He's far too busy climbing the career ladder to worry about butterflies and bees.

Alice jokes that he's classic middle-management material, but he doesn't mind. He just points to the big new SUV in his driveway and shrugs, as if to say, *That's why I work so hard*.

While George is proud of what he's achieved, he still admires Alice — and sometimes he wonders if he should pay more attention to the things she worries about.

In the summer, George often invites Alice and her family for BBQs. At one of these get-togethers, Alice tells George she's organised a petition asking their boss to reduce the coal and oil the factory uses. She then asks if he'll sign it, too, and whether he'll go with her for emotional support when she presents the signatures to their boss.

This is a dilemma for George. If he causes trouble, he might lose his bonus. On the other hand, he wants to help his closest friend. Eventually, after sleeping on it, he reluctantly agrees — and on Monday morning, the two friends walk up to the big house on the hill where their boss lives.



Dragon loves His life, and why wouldn't He?

3. ENTER THE DRAGON

This is Dragon.

He's 50 metres tall and weighs 20,000 tonnes.

And, to make things worse, he breathes fire when he's angry (which is often).

But then again, what do you expect from a Dragon?

About 250 years ago, Dragon showed up in what's now called *The Black Country*. It wasn't called that then, but his fiery breath and all the coal he ate soon covered everything in thick black soot. When he was a baby, he lived under an iron bridge — but now he's all grown up and has taken over the whole world, kicking out all the other monsters along the way.

Living the high life, Dragon does whatever he wants, which mainly involves scoffing vast quantities of coal and oil, which humans are required to provide to keep him growing. In the past, he worked the humans to death, but more recently, he's discovered they work harder when they have hope. So, he lets them dream about retirement while they work.

As you can see, he isn't a very nice Dragon. But then, dragons rarely are. (Apart from maybe *Puff* and the ones that live on the moon, making soup.)

But there's just one more thing I need to mention.

Thanks to his diet of fossil fuels, Dragon also produces enormous quantities of toxic farts — and they're slowly killing the planet. But he doesn't care too much about that. He's too busy enjoying himself.

"Who's bothering me at this hour?"

4. ESG # 1 (EASY SIGNALLING GESTURES)

So it came as a surprise (and, frankly, an inconvenience) when, on Monday morning, there was a knock at Dragon's door.

"Who's bothering me at this hour?" he grumbled, peering through the curtains.

He assumed it would be the hippies who'd been protesting outside his house for the past 30 years — holding their pathetic little placards and complaining about *"the environment"* without making the slightest bit of difference.

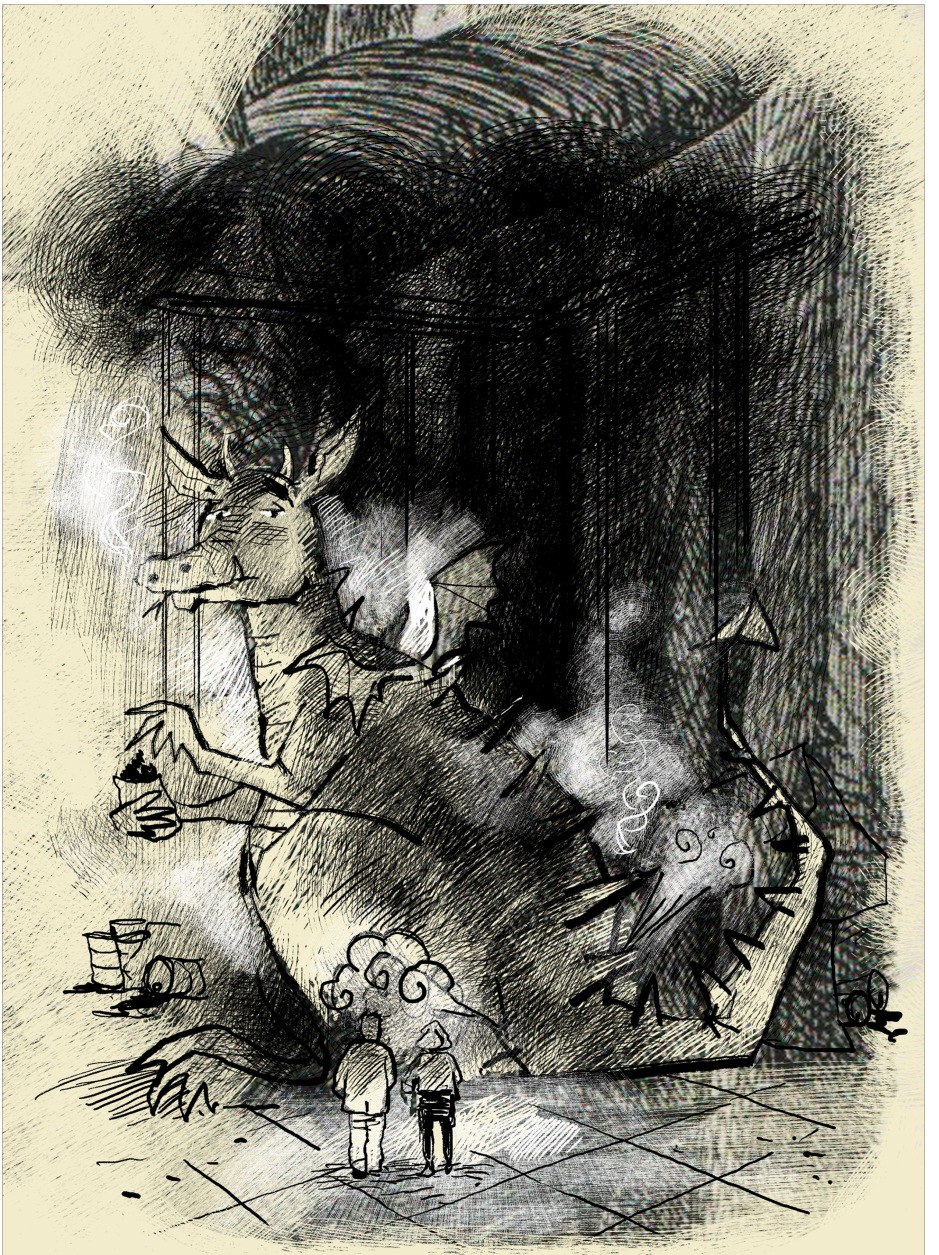
But this knock was different: one of the humans trembling on his doorstep was lazy Alice from Sales, and the other was a middle manager named George. Employees like *George* were supposed to be loyal, or risk losing their Christmas bonus.

"Better humour them," he thought, shrugging as he let them in.

In the hallway, Alice nervously explained the reason for their visit. Dragon found their demands confusing — something about butterflies, birds, tomatoes, and farts — so while he half-listened, he scanned the petition for names he might fire.

When it was over, he smiled politely and promised to do whatever he could, before ushering them out.

Closing the door, Dragon returned to his sofa, where he'd been idly munching on coal, and chuckled to himself about the part where they'd asked him to consider switching to a *plant-based diet*.



"You two again!" said Dragon with mock exasperation

5. ESG # 2 (EVADE SCRUTINY BY GASLIGHTING)

After the ordeal, Alice and George needed a drink, so they retired to their favourite pub to discuss how the meeting had gone. They were both relieved to still have a job. They'd been surprised at how amenable Dragon had seemed. He'd been a teddy bear!

Yet, after a couple of weeks, nothing seemed to have changed. George was still ordering the same amount of coal for Dragon, and Alice had not seen any improvement in the air quality.

"Perhaps Dragon doesn't realise how urgent this is?" mused George.

Alice was less generous, especially when she thought of her children, and knew in her heart they'd need to confront Dragon again.

So, the next day, the two friends trudged back up the hill.

"You two again!" said Dragon with mock exasperation. "What can I do for you this time?"

"We were hoping you'd had a chance to consider our proposition," said Alice firmly.

"Because we've not seen much improvement," added George.

"That's strange," replied Dragon. "I've altered my diet and been exercising — I'm told that helps offset my effluence."

"Wow!" George whispered to Alice.

"Guess we'll just have to take his word for it," she whispered back.

Dragon bid them farewell, adding, "I trust you're enjoying your new electric cars. So much better for the environment."

"Oh yes sir, thank you very much," replied George, in a tone that was a little too grovelling for Alice's liking.

"Take a look around if you want. I have the best dieticians and fitness coaches monitoring my activity.."

6. ESG # 3 (ELABORATELY STAGED GREENWASHING)

Two more weeks passed, and again, little seemed to have changed. Alice and George wondered if things were now even worse. More coal seemed to have been consumed, and more soot floated back.

"I'm starting to think he's taking us for fools," said Alice, growing angry now. George reluctantly agreed, so after knocking back their tequila shots, they trudged back up the hill for another nerve-wracking meeting.

"Again?" Dragon exclaimed, this time genuinely irritated. "Listen, I swear I'm doing all I can. Take a look around if you don't believe me. I ate a vegan sausage only this morning — and here's the empty wrapper. I've got top-notch dieticians and fitness coaches monitoring my every move. Ask them anything you like."

Alice and George approached a knot of lab-coated consultants holding clipboards. Despite their confident demeanour, Alice found it strange that they all seemed to be measuring different things and couldn't agree on what was important. Yet, when Dragon asked them how well he was doing, they enthusiastically applauded his efforts.

"So there you go!" Dragon declared triumphantly. "You've just got to trust me on this. After all, the toxic fumes I produce are just as dangerous to me as they are to you — so it's in my interest to Just Stop Farts!" He chuckled, amused by his joke. "Remember, only a healthy Dragon can save you from whatever else is out there."

The two friends walked home silently. Dragon had admitted he'd kill himself if he didn't change his ways. So why would he lie?

It was a puzzle they still needed to solve.

"Maybe we're thinking about this all wrong," said Alice

7. DON'T BELIEVE THE HYPE

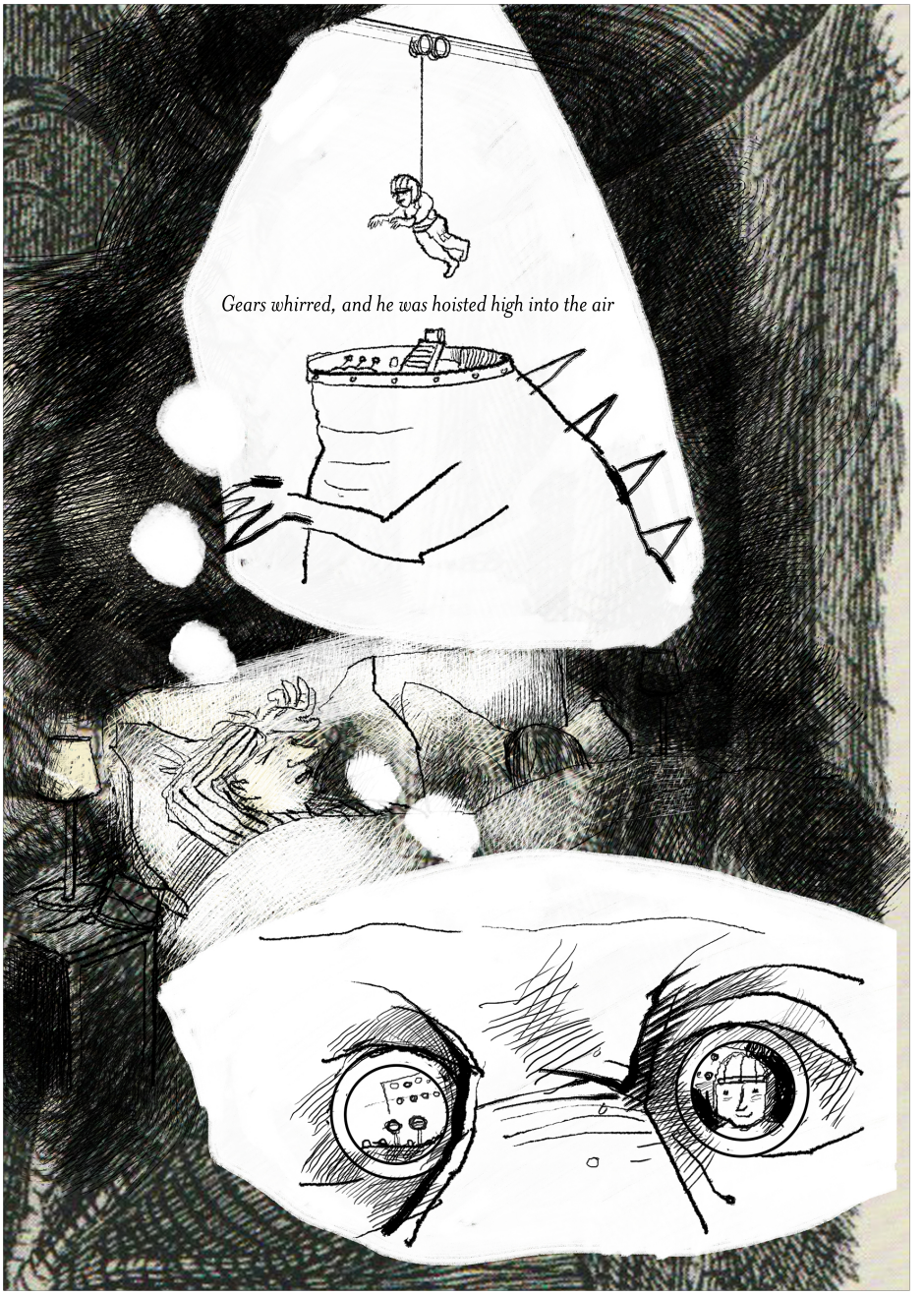
Alice and George were back at their usual table in their favourite pub, mulling over their most recent encounter with Dragon. They'd seen signs of vegan meals and exercise equipment, and the consultants seemed to know what they were doing. But, if all that were true, why hadn't Dragon cut back on his fuel consumption and why hadn't the air seemed cleaner?

Then, suddenly, Alice had a eureka moment! "Maybe we're thinking about this all wrong," she exclaimed. "We assume Dragon wants the same things as we do, but why should he? We are humans who care about our families and our planet, but Dragon is just a big, fat, lazy lizard, and the only thing he's interested in is where his next meal is coming from. He pretends to be our friend because that's how he gets us to feed him."

"Spot on," agreed George.

"At best, his promises are conditional; at worst, he's been gaslighting us", concluded Alice.

Realising that he'd been taken for a ride by Dragon's cynical behaviour, George suddenly felt incensed and shouted, "So, the lesson is: NEVER TRUST A DRAGON!" which drew confused stares from the rest of the bar. Relieved to have at least identified the challenge they were now faced with, the two friends finished their drinks and left.


Gears whirred, and he was hoisted high into the air

8. BAD DREAMS (are made of this)

Trying to figure out what made Dragon tick was exhausting work, so George lay on his bed, closed his eyes and tried to imagine how it would feel to be a cold and indifferent Dragon. Before long, sleep lulled him into a disturbing dream...

In the dream, George strolled briskly and happily to work. As usual, he noticed how quiet it was without the birds singing, but he didn't care because he couldn't wait to start his day. He greeted the friendly guard at the factory gate before walking to his locker and slipping into his overalls. Next, he marched to the centre of the massive hangar and clambered into the harness hanging from the ceiling.

With a thumbs-up, he signalled to the hoist operator, and gears whirred into action, lifting him high into the air before assistants pulled him towards the colossal body of a headless dragon. When hanging directly over it, George gave another thumbs-up, and the gears lowered him slowly into the dragon's 'cockpit'. The dragon's massive head was then drawn over him, and George felt a shiver of excitement.

George looked around the dashboard and flipped a switch, which caused the monster to lurch into life. A second switch triggered a blast of fire from its mouth, and a third caused a deafening roar that made his assistants cover their ears. George felt a delicious rush of adrenaline as he pulled a final lever, and the monster stumbled outside into the smoggy sunlight.

And while he knew these feelings were wrong, he also secretly enjoyed them

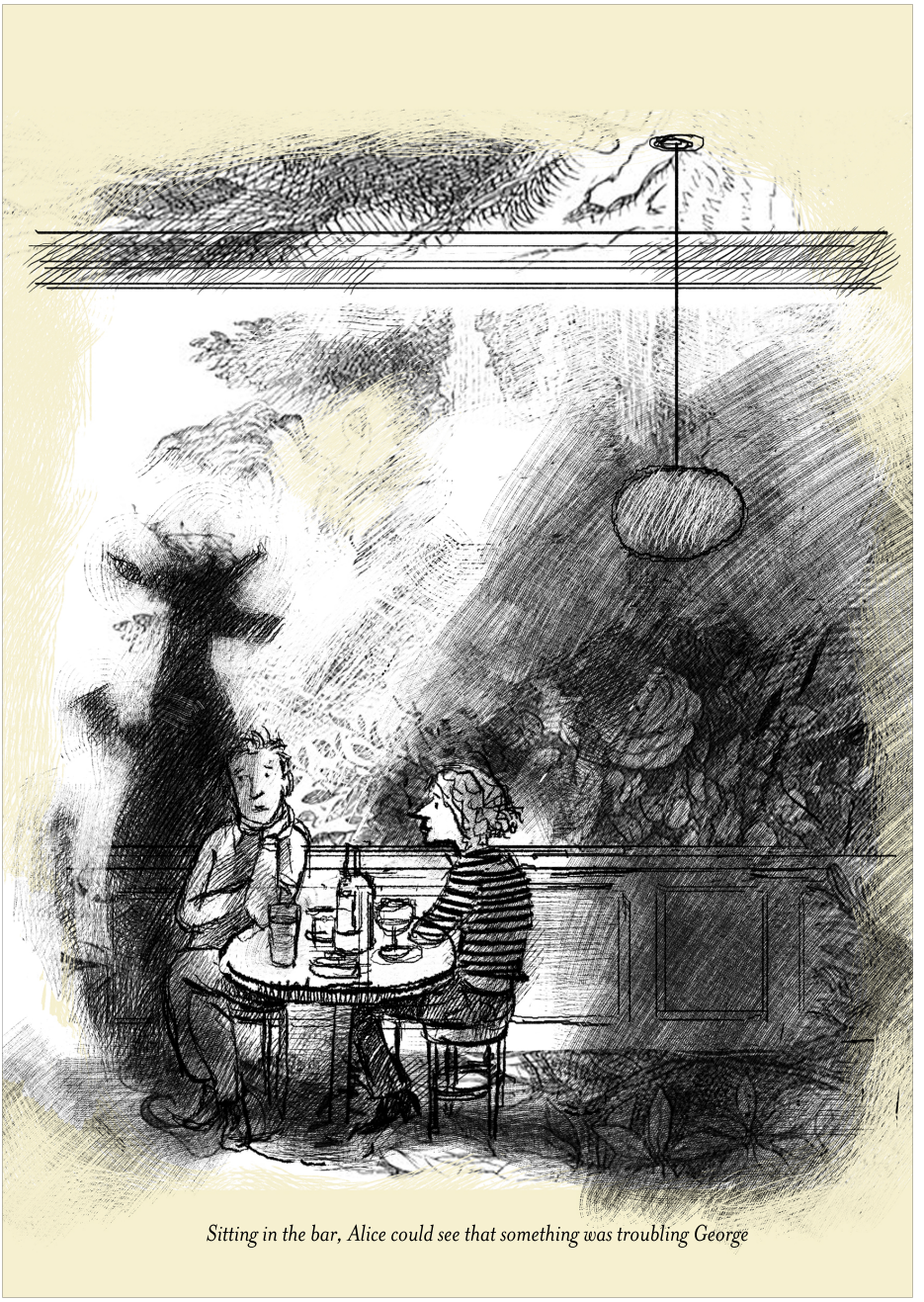
9. FEVER!

George jolted awake, drenched in sweat, his heart pounding in his chest. The dream had seemed so real, and he couldn't shake off the unsettling feeling that he'd actually enjoyed himself. Knowing he was so powerful was a fantastic feeling. He also liked how the other factory workers were in awe of him. It made him feel so important. But something about the feeling was also unsettling: What if he'd met some small, insignificant people like Alice outside the factory gates? How might he have treated them? Would he have even cared about their safety?

It was a weird mix of the familiar and the foreign, a sort of *déjà vu* that reminded him of when he'd been to a rifle range and fired a powerful handgun. It had given him the same thrilling feeling of power, and for a moment, he could almost understand why gun owners in the United States were so opposed to gun laws, even if it meant an occasional school shooting. He didn't want to admit it, even to himself. Still, being inside the dragon, it was hard to deny that thrill of unlimited status and power.

But then, he suddenly remembered he was seeing Alice in a few hours to plan how they were going to make Dragon change his ways.

He wondered whether to tell her about his dream. It might help them understand the Dragon, but he also felt ashamed of his feelings, so on reflection, he decided some things were probably best left unsaid, especially where dragons were concerned.



Sitting in the bar, Alice could see that something was troubling George

10. HOW TO (RES)TRAIN A DRAGON

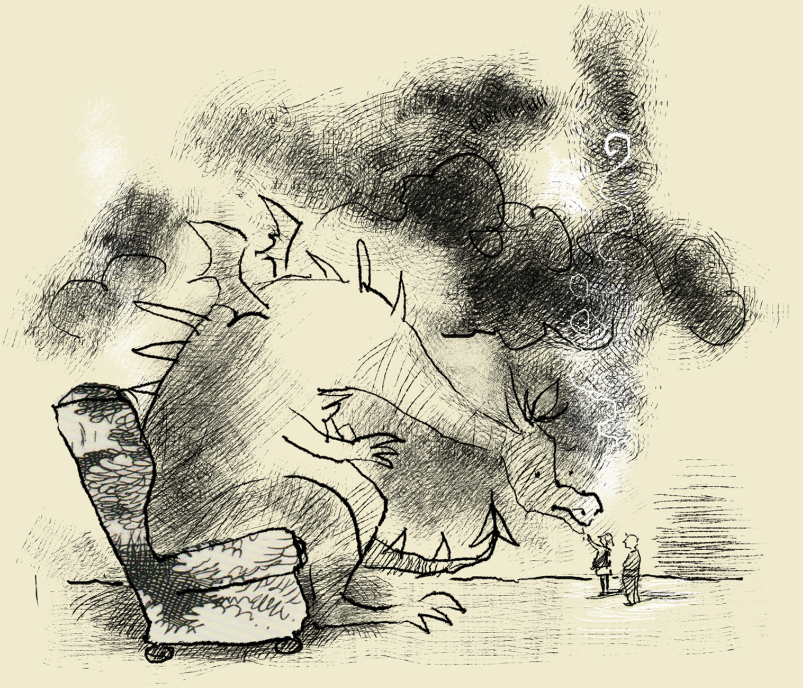
As they sat in the bar, Alice saw that something was troubling George. Given their recent lack of progress with Dragon**,** she assumed he felt defeated. Their boss constantly broke his promises, and it seemed increasingly apparent that he was just taking them for fools.

In reality, George was thinking about something much more personal. He kept reliving the dream he'd had the night before and the intoxicating rush of power he'd felt. He was ashamed to admit it, but he knew he envied the Dragon's power and strength.

So when Alice asked George what they might do next, he was lost for words and looked back at her blankly. Annoyed, Alice shook him, asking if he was paying attention. When that didn't work, she reached inside her bag and pulled out a photo of her kids to remind him who they were fighting for. This snapped George's attention back into the room.

As George cleared his mind, he suddenly understood what to do. He'd seen the world through Dragon's eyes, and he now realised that trying to reason with an addict was pointless because an addict isn't rational.

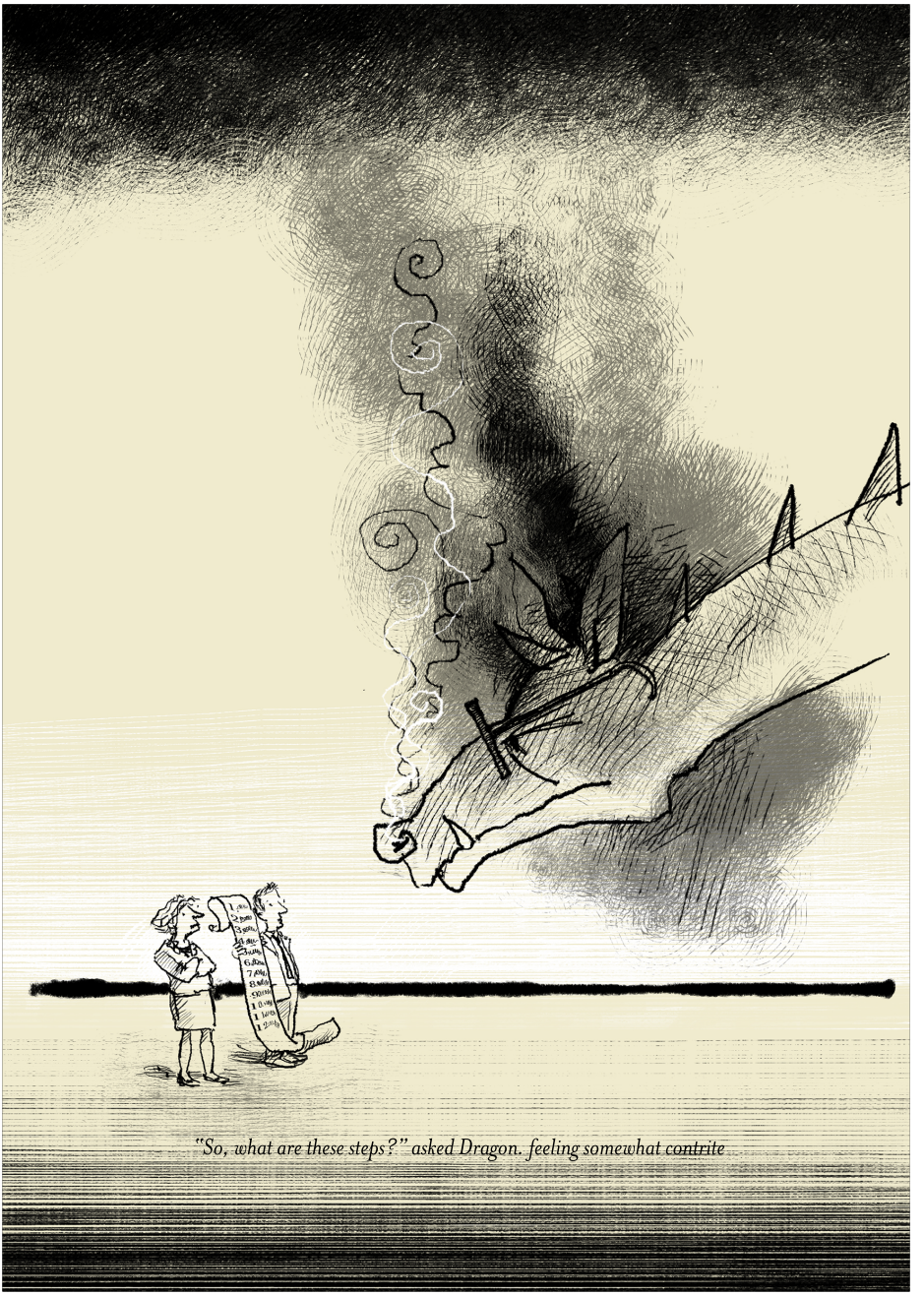
"So how do we persuade an addict to change his ways?" asked Alice.



"Take a seat, Dragon," said Alice, "and listen carefully."

11. THE DRUGS DON'T WORK

Alice approached Dragon and forcefully said, "Take a seat."
Dragon was surprised by Alice's boldness, so he thought he'd sit down and see what happened next.
"We can't make you keep your promises," said George, no longer sounding like a timorous employee. "We can't MAKE you do anything; you're too powerful for that. But it seems to us that you're more concerned about money than you are about staying alive."
"Kill yourself if you like,' said Alice, picking up the theme, "But it isn't fair of you to kill us too. So listen up!"
Dragon was mildly impressed. There was something admirable about these puny humans and their willingness to stand up to him. This, in turn, prompted him to think about their pretty little planet and what a pity it would be to destroy it.
George drove home the point: "So if you care about saving us and saving yourself as a bonus, you're going to have to admit you've got a problem."
"You've got to accept you're addicted to SPAM," added Alice bluntly.
"SPAM!!!?" Exclaimed Dragon, affronted by such an outlandish accusation. "You're suggesting I'm addicted to that dreadful Spiced Ham? Are you mad? Can't stand the stuff I'll have, you know. I only ever eat the very finest cuts of corn-fed *Kobi* beef!"
"No — not Spam," corrected Alice: "S.P.A.M.!"
"Status, Power, and Money!" George explained slowly. "You're addicted to Status, Power, and Money!"
And, just then, a tiny miracle occurred. For a split second, Dragon caught a glimpse of himself as others saw him, and it was a profoundly depressing image.



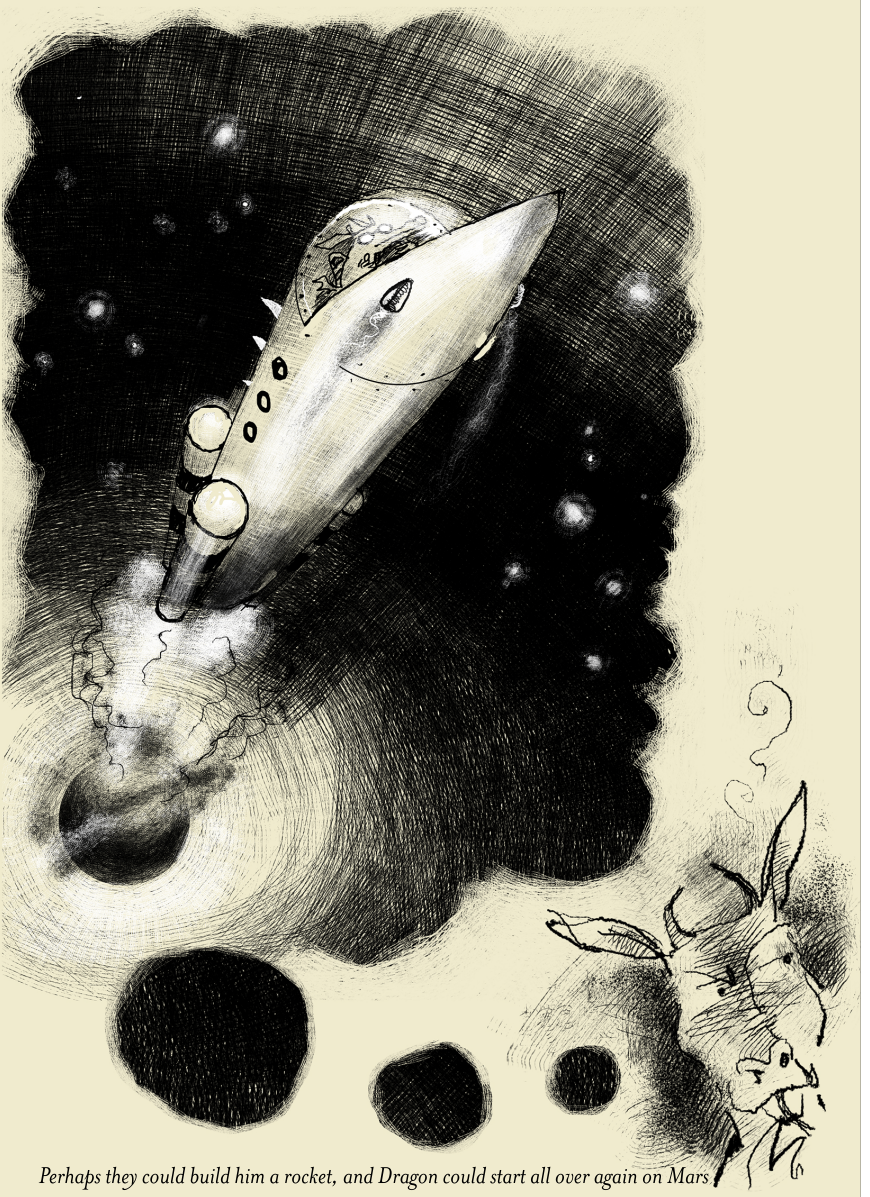
"So, what are these steps?" asked Dragon, feeling somewhat contrite

12. TRIED TO MAKE HIM GO TO REHAB

"So here's what you're going to have to do," said Alice forcefully. If you're willing to take this first step," she continued," you might discover that power isn't all that great after all."
"And it doesn't make you happy," added George.
Dragon sensed that what they were saying had a ring of truth about it.
"So, what are these steps?" he enquired now, genuinely curious.
To answer him, George unrolled a long scroll he'd been holding under his arm and read it aloud.

1. Admit you're hooked on power, and you need to stop making excuses.
2. Realise you can't tackle this alone.
3. Ask for support from people like us.
4. Be brutally honest with yourself and own up to your flaws.
5. Share your faults with others, even if that feels tough.
6. Dig deeper and uncover more faults.
7. Seek assistance from others to pinpoint these faults.
8. Acknowledge the people you've hurt due to your addiction.
9. Take steps to make amends and compensate them.
10. Keep uncovering more faults (there's always more).
11. And don't hesitate to seek ongoing support.
12. Lastly, pay it forward by aiding other addicts.

*Other addiction programs are available



Perhaps they could build him a rocket, and Dragon could start all over again on Mars

13. HOOKED ON A FEELING

Obviously, this was not what Dragon had expected when he'd opened his door that morning. In fact, he doubted anyone would have expected a plot twist like this in a *children's story!* But, as Dragon reflected on what these people were saying, he knew they were speaking the truth. He just hadn't wanted to hear it.

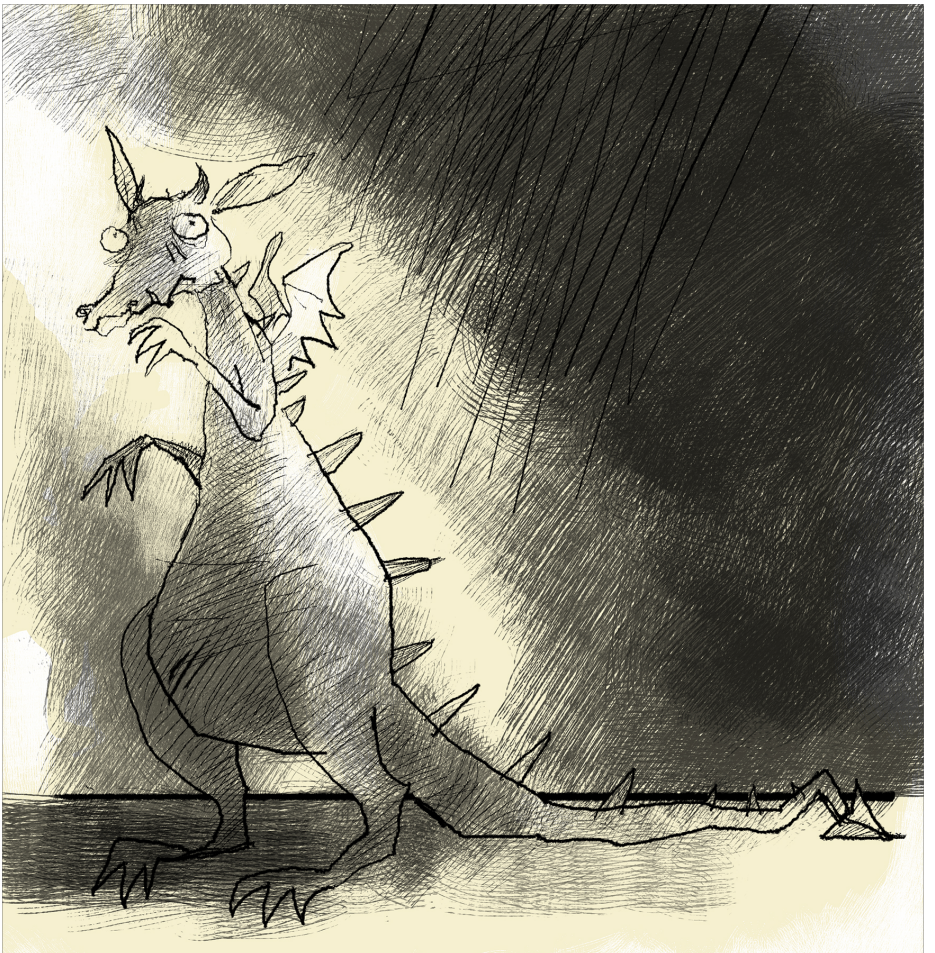
Maybe he wasn't all-powerful after all. If he ever allowed himself to think about it, he'd realise that power and money weren't the answer: deep down, his soul was empty, and no amount of money could fill it.

Dragon was at a crossroads: either change his ways and enjoy life or stick to his guns and face a squalid end.

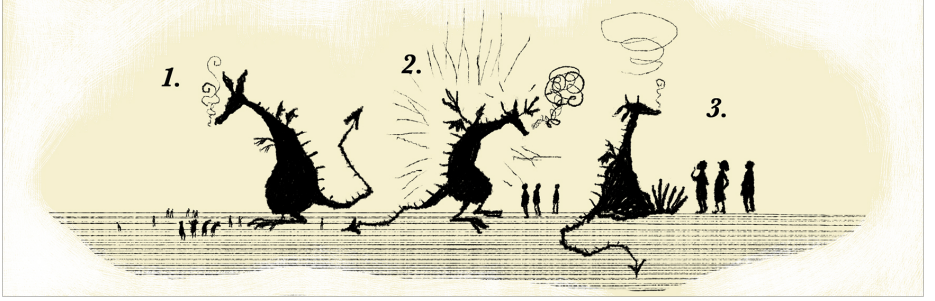
For a power-addicted dragon, this was a tough call. A life without power sounded very dull. I mean, who ever heard of a 'humble' dragon? So, Dragon weighed up his options.

First, he thought about simply ignoring the humans. Perhaps they were wrong? But when he considered the evidence stacked against him, he knew that, deep down, they were right. Next, he wondered if his scientists could maybe filter his farts so they were no longer dangerous. But he knew such technology would take too long to build, so this was also a non-starter. Finally, he considered building a space rocket and blasting off to Mars, leaving behind the mess he'd made. But even he could see only a total moron would contemplate such a thing.

After considering his position, he decided the humans were probably right. If he didn't want to kill himself, he should probably take their advice. He was hooked on power, and it was time to face the music.



Dragon stumbled outside, confused



14. EXIT THE DRAGON

You probably thought this was already a strange story, but hang on because here's where it gets even more bizarre. With all this new information, Dragon began to feel confused and disorientated, so he stepped outside for fresh air. As he did so, he noticed for the first time that it wasn't 'fresh' at all but full of soot and fumes. He looked around at the exhausted people trudging home after a long day at work, and he could see they were afraid of him, but they also looked at him with contempt.

Feeling hot and uncomfortable, Dragon scratched at his scaly skin until something strange started to happen: one of his claws had snagged a thread, which, in turn, pulled apart the seam that held his armour plates together, and, slowly, his dragon suit began to split and fall apart.

Light from somewhere outside was now streaming in, making his eyes hurt. After a few more scratches, the Dragon's head fell backwards, revealing the sky above. George suddenly realised he was sitting high above the ground in what remained of the dragon suit.

"But I thought this was just a dream," he muttered as he scrambled down the now lifeless tail to where a small crowd had gathered to stare at him. They first looked at the Dragon, then at George, and then at the Dragon again, unable to decide which was which. But gradually, they understood that a dragon had four legs and that George had two. Therefore, George was no monster, just a human like them.

George pushed through this docile crowd and ran down the street as fast as he could, towards a neighbourhood he thought he recognised.

George climbed down the spiked tail of the now inanimate Dragon

15. COLD TURKEY

"George!" yelled Alice, running up to him. "I've been looking all over for you. Did you hear the news? The Dragon has gone!"

Alice placed her arm around George's shoulder and steered him to the bar. "Dragon is going to need some serious help after our therapy session," she laughed triumphantly. "It'll be a shock for him at first. I mean, two hundred years of addiction won't be easy to shake off, but if he keeps in mind what the alternative is, he'll see that life can be so much better now."

Still nervous, George asked, "But will he?"

Alice reassured him, "Well, living in an ivory tower, cut off from the real world, might feed your ego, but it's a pretty soulless existence."

George knew all about that, so he nodded in agreement.

"But won't it be dangerous?" He asked, still trying to understand how his crazy dream had come true. "If Dragon stops growing, won't it kill us?"

Alice brushed this off with a chuckle, saying, "Nah, that's just a scary story he used to control us. Name one example of a species that can only survive if it keeps growing. Nature looks for equilibrium and balance, so why should a dragon be any different?"

George agreed and wondered why he'd never thought about that before.

"Dragon was never satisfied, and that's why he was never happy," said Alice. "The secret to happiness is appreciating what you've already got."

Reflecting on this, George added, "It's like my mum always said — don't take things for granted and live within your means."

"So true," agreed Alice. "Too bad nobody told the dragon."

"And what if I told you that you'll love your work because you're doing more of what you love?"

16. DON'T STOP BELIEVING

Alice took a big gulp of her beer and mulled over what had happened to Dragon. "You know, there's one last reason Dragon was so powerful."

"What's that?" asked George nervously, hoping Alice hadn't seen through to his personal dragon hidden underneath.

"He kept us all working for him by appealing to our selfish nature."

At this, George shifted uncomfortably.

"Something hit me when you were reading him our ultimatum," she said, "I thought I could see a sort of human trapped inside him, albeit a misshapen and warped version of a human."

George panicked. Was Alice onto him? "Really?" he asked uneasily.

"Yeah," Alice affirmed. "I realised Dragon is just a manifestation of our need for Status, Power & Money (S.P.A.M). He's a product of our selfishness."

George saw those similarities, too, and felt ashamed.

"Well," Alice interrupted his thoughts, "he's gone now, and we've finally broken the spell."

Alice raised her glass in celebration.

"Call it enlightened self-interest if you like, but there's still a chance we can save our skins"

17. (PICKING UP) GOOD VIBRATIONS

"Cheers to that," George agreed, still feeling like a fraud. He could still remember the thrill he'd felt inside the dragon suit, so he asked, "But won't folks still want to buy fancy cars and exotic holidays?"

"Maybe," Alice nodded, "but will we still want new cars if we no longer need to keep up with the Joneses? Especially if we know we'll have a better chance of surviving the next 50 years?"

"That's true," agreed George, turning this idea carefully over in his head.

"New cars aren't all that important when the planet's at stake, not to mention our children's futures," Alice added.

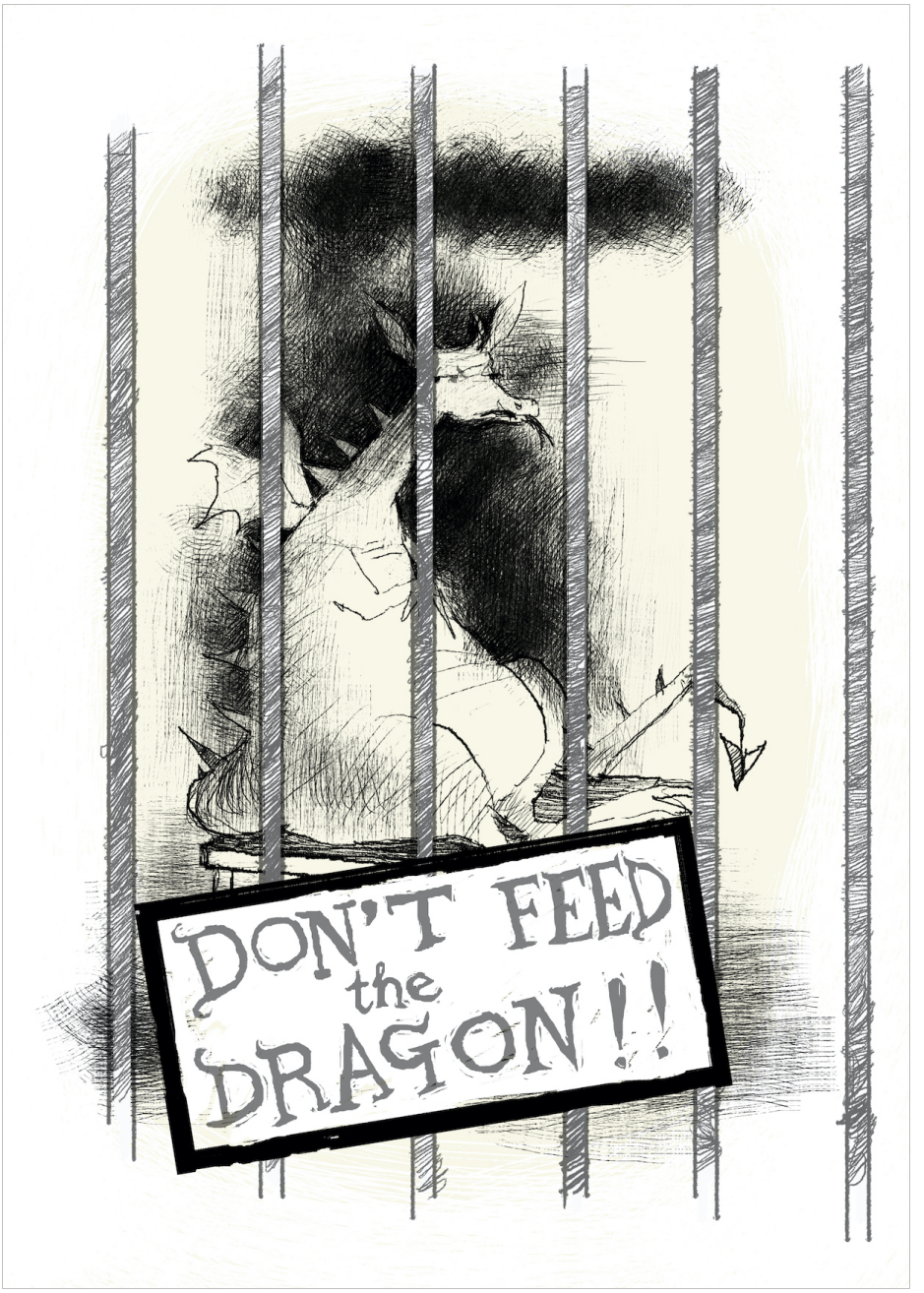
"Well, when you put it like that..." George agreed.

"And think about all the perks of a Dragon-free world.' She continued. "If you're not constantly having to feed him, you'll have more time for your kids and hobbies and golf handicap."

"I love it!" Said George, now nodding emphatically.

"And instead of buying cheap crap that ends up in landfills, we'll be making quality stuff from sustainable sources and feeling the satisfaction of a job well done. That's what we can expect now that Dragon is no longer breathing down our necks 24/7."

George was sold on this idea and excited about the possibilities that lay ahead.


DON'T FEED
the
DRAGON!!

18. HERE'S TO LIFE

As George listened to these exciting new ideas, he realised he had to come clean with Alice. "Alice, I've got something to tell you," he said nervously. "Two nights ago, I had a terrible dream: I was inside Dragon, seeing the world through his eyes, and that's how I realised he was addicted to power and that we needed to treat his addiction."

"Interesting," said Alice, leaning in and urging him to continue.

"I kept it from you because I felt ashamed," George confessed. Alice just nodded sympathetically.

"After we gave Dragon our ultimatum, I just couldn't handle my hypocrisy," George explained.

"I sort of figured that," Alice replied calmly, relieved to hear his confession. "I knew you were reluctant to challenge Dragon because, in a way, you admired him. You wanted the sort of control over your life that you believed he had over his. But although he had all that power and could buy whatever he wanted, he never seemed happy, and you never seemed happy either. A week after buying your latest car, you were already thinking about the next one."

George nodded sadly in agreement.

"What's more, you knew it was killing the planet but you still couldn't kick the habit!"

"Cheer up," said Alice, "life's about to get a lot better."

"I know, I know," agreed George, sobbing a little.
"Don't be too hard on yourself," consoled Alice kindly. "We're all like that sometimes."
"Some more than others," acknowledged George, grateful for Alice's understanding. "But I tell you what," he continued, "if you ever catch me looking at new car brochures or staring in a showroom window, remind me I'm an idiot."
"I will," agreed Alice, laughing, "But, chin up," she said, "now that Dragon has gone, life is gonna get a whole lot better around here."
The two friends clinked their glasses.
"Cheers to that!" replied George with a smile.

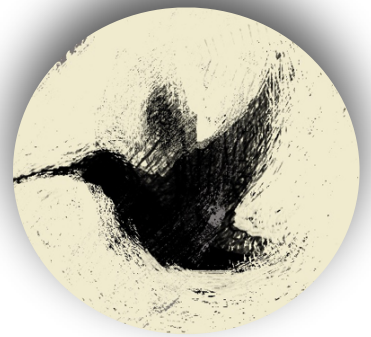
THE END

Author's note:

While reading this curious little story, you may have wondered how these ideas stack up in the *real* world. If that's the case, take a look at the second part of the book. After all, it's in your hand already, so you may as well. In this section, I delve deeper into these ideas and sprinkle in a few jokes because if you didn't laugh, you'd cry at what we're doing to the planet.

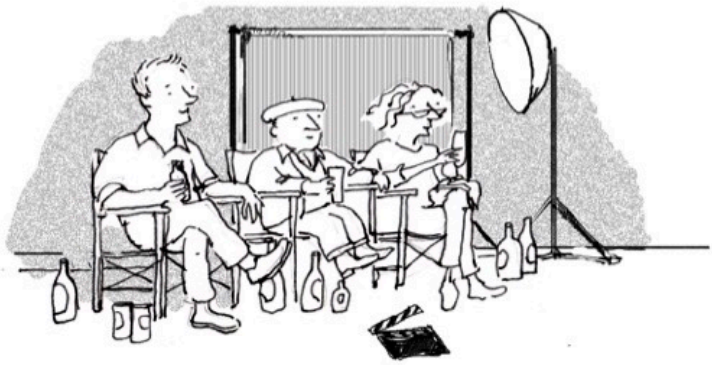
Enjoy!

Part Two: THE HUMMINGBIRD



— *an* EXPLAINER

1: The Wrap Party – WHAT'S GOING ON?



1.1: "And.....Cut!"

"...And that's a wrap!" yelled the Director with a mixture of triumph and relief, marking the end of the day's shoot and the movie's final scene. The previously silent 'pub' suddenly burst into life as 'Alice' and 'George' relaxed, set aside their prop glasses, and shared a heartfelt hug across the table.

The sound engineer lowered the boom, the camerawoman took her eye from the viewfinder, and the grip put down the reflective sheet she'd been using to light the actors' faces. Four months of hard work had come to an end, and everyone was feeling a little euphoric.

"Great job, everyone!" called the Director, clapping his hands as he walked toward the actors. "I'm looking forward to having a drink tonight without that fucking dragon on my mind."

Alice and George were used to the Director swearing. He did it a lot.

"Absolutely!" exclaimed the actor who'd been playing Alice. "I won't be thinking about the evils of capitalism for at least the next two weeks."

"Why's that?" asked the forty-something actor who'd been playing George, finally free from the problematic northern English accent he'd been wrestling with throughout the shoot.

"Well," explained Alice, "I'm giving a speech at the *Just Stop Oil* rally in Trafalgar Square in the first week of November."

"No rest for the *woke-ed*," chuckled the Director, patting her on the back, already anticipating that he'd be in the crowd that night to hear her speak.

'George' felt a little left out of this conversation—his handsome, earnest face seen in so many leading roles in Hollywood blockbusters, but here playing against type.

He'd taken the male lead in this movie, quietly hoping for an *Oscar* or at least a BAFTA for his sympathetic portrayal of the conflicted middle manager. It was a unique blend of kitchen-sink drama and CGI-fest, and if it helped raise awareness of the climate crisis, all the better, for the planet and his career.

White plastic cups were distributed, Prosecco was opened, and the extended crew gathered to celebrate the end of the shoot.

Half an hour and several bottles later, the crew returned to dismantle the set while the Director and his two leads continued to reflect on their completed work. They'd grappled with a complex script which, together with the challenge of working with an imaginary dragon, had created some difficult moments. But now it was over, they sensed it was both a job well done and worth doing.

There was a lull in the conversation, so Alice took a moment to check her watch. She'd promised her husband she'd be home by 7 o'clock to put her little ones to bed, and she'd been looking for a moment to respectfully say her

goodbyes. This she did with a kiss on each cheek for George and a vast, friendly hug from the Director, with whom she was bound to work again soon.
George could see the Director was in a relaxed and approachable mood, so this was surely the moment he'd been waiting for—to ask what had been on his mind since he'd first read the part. Until now, he'd avoided asking it for fear of looking superficial. Yet, through all that subsequent time, and even during the shoot, he hadn't found an appropriate moment.
After all, the Director was famously short-tempered, and George had no wish to get in his line of fire. And what if the gossip columnists got hold of it? He could see the headlines now: **ACTION HERO REALLY IS AS DUMB AS HE LOOKS.** So, he'd kept his own counsel and hoped his acting would carry him through.
"So, how are you feeling? Are you satisfied with how it's turned out?" he asked the Director tentatively, finally slipping out of character and returning to his easy Californian drawl. "Did you get what you wanted?"
The Director looked at George and warmly patted his shoulder. "Yes, I'm delighted, thank you. And you were outstanding."
"Great!" George replied, his relief palpable. "I should have asked you this earlier, but… what was it all about?"
Somewhat puzzled, the Director took a swig from his cup and asked, "What do you mean?" He had no idea the movie they'd just wrapped had gone entirely over George's head.
George took a deep breath, realising he'd now have to own his ignorance. The Director was a short, stocky figure with a strong Scottish accent. George reckoned he must now be in his early seventies, and over his long career, he'd developed a reputation for being difficult, standing up to the studios for better pay for his technicians and marching in solidarity at the Iraq War, anti-Trump demos, and more recently, Gaza.

So, little wonder George found him somewhat intimidating. Moreover, George and the Director had discussed the script every day for the past six weeks and met on set for a solid month to shoot it. So, for George to admit he hadn't grasped the movie's underlying message was, frankly, terrifying.

For a moment, the Director was unsure how to respond. Still, rather than anger, a depressing sense of defeat seeped into him. He'd always known that George wasn't the sharpest tool in Hollywood, but it wasn't George's fault he hadn't understood the message. Instead, the Director felt sympathy, realising that his failure to convey the story's meaning to this actor, who'd been paid almost a million dollars to appear in the role, more accurately reflected his own shortcomings as a storyteller.

"We're doomed," muttered the Director to himself as he gazed into George's sincere, puppy-dog eyes. If he couldn't convince George about climate change and motivate him to act on what he'd learned, how could he expect paying moviegoers to do the same? He wouldn't blame the audience if they'd stood up, left the movie halfway through, marched back to the ticket office, and asked for their money back.

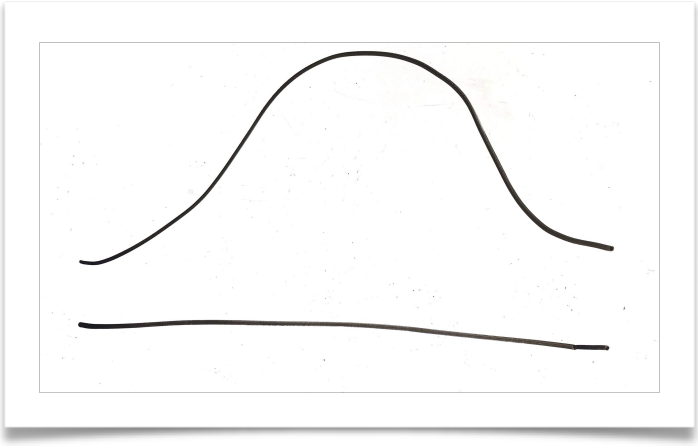
The Director's goal had always been to reach a mainstream audience caught between a rock and a hard place—in this case, the 'rock' being a growing awareness that the world is teetering on the brink of disaster, and the 'hard place' of knowing that busy working people can't just throw in their jobs and join Extinction Rebellion. He also believed the answers wouldn't come from massive government interventions but rather from a billion individual commitments made by society as a whole.

His mission, therefore, was to make every George in the world understand what they could do to help. So, the Director filled two large plastic cups with bubbly, mentally rolled up his sleeves, took a deep breath, and began to explain his story from the top.

"Take a seat," he said, motioning George towards a canvas chair. "We have much to discuss."

1.2: Comfortably Numb

"Okay, first things first," the director began with renewed resolve. "Hand me that script over there on the table."
George passed over the dog-eared, annotated script he'd been poring over between takes for the past four weeks.
The Director retrieved the stubby pencil he habitually tucked behind his ear and began to draw a curve like this:

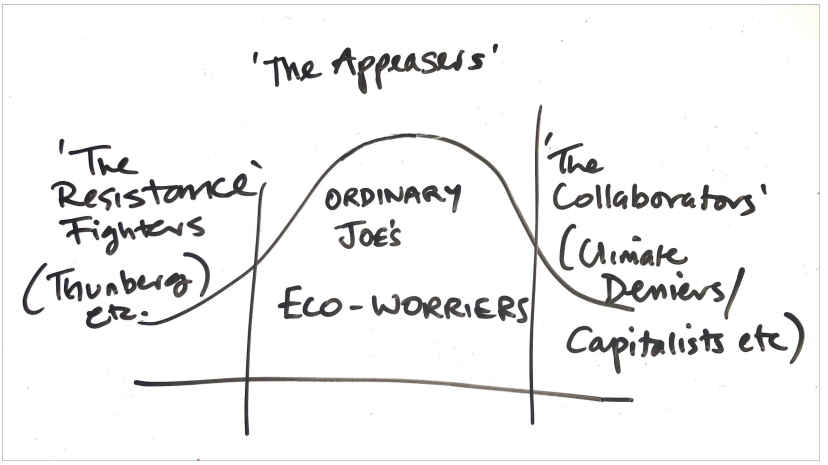


"Oh, oh! I know what this is!" exclaimed George, pleased with himself. "It's a boa constrictor eating an elephant!"
"What are you talking about?" asked the Director, somewhat bemused. "It's a bell curve! I'm explaining the audience I had win mind when I wrote the screenplay." Then, with a look of concentration, he returned to his drawing.

"You see, at the moment, there's a war going on between a small group of *Eco-Warriors* here on the left—people like Greta Thunberg and her *Just Stop Oil* and *Extinction Rebellion* allies—who are like the freedom fighters taking the battle to CO_2, which is causing global warming. Then, on the right here, we've got an equally small but far more powerful and better-equipped cabal of misguided, climate-denying capitalists who are more or less collaborating with an enemy that's bent on destroying the planet."

"They sound like Dr. No with LinkedIn Premium membership." Said George.

"You're not wrong," agreed the Director. "And then there's a lot of ordinary folk in the middle here, who I'm calling the **Eco-WORRIERS**." The Director ensured George understood what he thought was a clever play on words. Then, pointing to the hump in the middle of the bell curve, he continued, "This lot—probably including you and me and most of the people we hang out with—you know, nice, middle-class people who can see something bad is happening but aren't sure what to do about it. We know there's a battle going on between the Resistance Fighters and the Collaborators, but we're still not quite sure whose side we're on. So we just sit on the fence."



"So we're climate change In-Activists then!" quipped George. "This reminds me of *Star Wars*—the *Rebel Alliance* versus the *Galactic Republic*." (George would find a popular movie to illustrate his point whenever possible.)

"You're not far wrong," smiled the Director approvingly. "But this isn't 'A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away'; this is right here on Earth, right now—and it's our planet that's about to be atomised by the Death Star, otherwise known as climate change!"

"Really?" asked George, unsure if the Director was serious.

"And George, in case you're wondering whether I'm serious," the director replied firmly, "I'm being deadly serious."

Seeing George's difficulty grasping the enormity of the situation, the Director searched for a better way to describe the scale of danger. "You know that bit in *Star Wars* where Luke, Han, Leia, and Chewy are slowly being crushed in the trash compactor?"

"Classic scene," confirmed George, smiling as he recalled it. "Though I think you're referring to *Episode IV – A New Hope*, sir."

"Whatever," conceded the Director. "The point is—we are now exactly at that same point, right here on Earth. The walls are closing in, and this time, R2-D2 isn't going to rescue us. This time, the solution lies with us, and if we don't find an answer, and quickly, we're going to be squashed like a cockroach."

This stark image wiped the smile off George's face.

The Director continued his exposition, pleased to see he'd achieved his goal. "Sure, right now, we might take our reusable bags to the supermarket, try to cut down on our plastic bottle usage and look for the recyclable icon on the side of yoghurt pots. We might even make sure our coffee is *Fairtrade* and our laundry detergent is environmentally friendly. And all of this helps us feel we're *doing our bit*. Yet, despite all this, it's hard to escape the uncomfortable feeling that we ought to be doing something far more drastic. But when we think about that—it's so complicated and inconvenient, we just keep our heads down and hope this nasty business quietly sorts itself out. All of which makes us, more or less, appeasers."

George looked at the scribbles the Director was making while saying all this and mentally agreed that he did indeed sit somewhere in the middle of that curve, just as the Director had suggested.

"The thing is, you see," continued the Director, "it's we *eco-worriers* who make up 90 per cent of the population. People like teachers, doctors, nurses—honest, considerate folk working in shops and factories, as well as people working from home. Older people, younger people. People who work for bosses, but also people who run their own businesses. They might even be the middle managers—like your character in the movie, George—who work for big corporations and drive electric cars. Most of the B-Corp brigade [1] will be in there, too, and maybe even a few conflicted CEOs of multinationals, still taking their hefty pay cheques but at least now feeling uncomfortable about the companies they work for and unsure how to get out.

"And I desperately want people to understand that if all of us here in the middle got our act together and mobilised, we'd have far more power than all

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[1] A **B-Corp** business has been certified to demonstrate high social and environmental performance, has changed its corporate governance structure to be accountable to all stakeholders and allow information about their financial performance to be made public on B—Lab's website. https://www.bcorporation.net

the climate deniers combined. And we wouldn't need to resort to physical combat or anything like that—there'd be no need to go Full Thunberg. If only we knew that, by working together to apply concerted pressure through our choices and behaviour, we could stop this climate crisis dead in its tracks. Collectively, we can change everything. And I mean *everything*. It's just that we don't know it yet. But we *can*—and *will*—if we unite now, get our act together, and take responsibility."

The Director waved his arms in a circle to emphasise this point.

"We could stop CO2 emissions if we genuinely wanted to, but we don't—because, quite frankly, we're just too lazy and complacent. So we try not to think about it and sit around wringing our hands instead.

"Don't get me wrong, I have the greatest respect for Greta Thunberg and her Extinction Rebellion allies," reassured the Director. "The Establishment detests her because they know she's on to them—and if they allow her to have her way, she'll stop them maximising their profits."

But every time there's an extreme weather event—like that time New York City turned orange [2], or when that inferno in Hawaii [3] incinerated so many people—we start to suspect she might be right. Because these are not isolated incidents, but signs of a rapidly changing climate that demands our immediate and full attention.

We might even be prompted to look into what the Just Stop Oil people are

[2] **New York City**: in 2020, wildfires in Canada turn the city orange.

[3] **Hawaii**: In August 2023 98 people were killed by smoke, flames or drowning and almost 3,000 structures were either damaged or destroyed by wildfires.

so concerned about, and why they're ...willing to take the drastic action that will probably put them in jail. But it's a little bit too uncomfortable to think about, so we turn on the telly, find a new Netflix boxset to binge on, and hope it will all be sorted by the time they get to the third season—while reassuring ourselves that it's probably not as bad as they're making out. After all, we're all still here, aren't we?

"What's more, who will employ us if we go on *Extinction Rebellion* marches, having to call our boss on Monday morning to explain why we're in jail? Who's going to feed our kids and pay the mortgage? So it's best not to think about it and let that sleeping dog snooze a little longer.

"And we might also console ourselves that none of this could be as black and white as the *Just Stop Oil* fanatics make out. After all, plenty of intelligent, upstanding citizens are on the other side of the argument. Like the politicians and CEOs of multinational corporations who make up the *Dragon Economy*, they have important jobs, fly around in private jets, and earn a ton of money, so they must know what they're talking about. Not to mention the investment bankers and pension fund managers telling us not to worry about extremists like Greta, who, after all, is probably on the autistic spectrum anyway. And then, to seal the deal, they'll remind us how much we enjoy fast food, new cars, and foreign holidays—all of which would be a thing of the past if we started listening to the extremists. And every time *Just Stop Oil* blocks a road and prevents an ambulance from getting a critically ill patient to an hospital, it's an excellent opportunity to remind us that climate protesters are threatening our cherished way of life."

"Whoa!" said George, recoiling a little. "That escalated fast!"

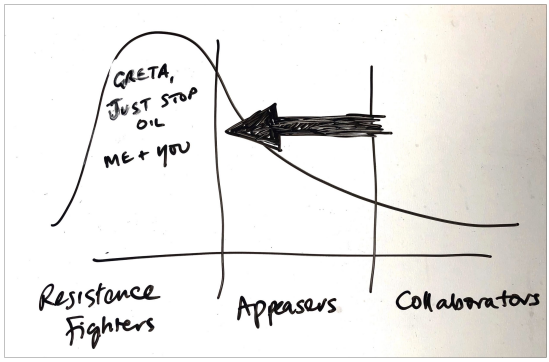
"Hang on a minute, George," replied the Director, not wanting George to reject his thesis. "You might think this is a bit over-the-top, but the truth is, I'm only laying out the facts as they stand. Check them yourself if you don't believe me. Maybe ten years ago you could still find scientists willing to

suggest that climate change was a myth, but now it's pretty much accepted as fact—and climate deniers are now more or less in the same category as flat-earthers. If there's anything I've said that you disagree with, I'd love to hear it. You see, this isn't a political issue. Actually, the whole point of this movie is to demonstrate that climate change *isn't* about politics at all. It's a personal issue for each of us as individuals.

I'm not even trying to criticise the politicians or the capitalists—that's too easy. These *Dragon Capitalists* are just opportunists, taking advantage of our selfish streak. No, the people I'm criticising in all this are ourselves—those of us willing to turn a blind eye to the consequences of our selfish actions. I'm blaming us for our complacency, our wilful ignorance, and our willingness to turn our backs on the problem.

The answer to solving global warming lies in the middle of this bell curve, where most of us live—and when we are all finally prepared to come to terms with that, we might just stand a chance of saving ourselves."

While saying all this, the Director continued to scribble with his stubby pencil. "So what we've got to do—and the point of this movie," he continued, "is to shift the narrative like this."



The Director drew a new curve with a big arrow pointing left to demonstrate his vision for escaping climate disaster.

"When we move this curve, we'll achieve critical mass—and when that happens, we'll change our future."

He now looked George in the eye and said earnestly, "The climate doesn't discriminate. It's a disaster that's coming for all of us, so we've *all* got to do our bit to stop it. We've *all* got to stop appeasing and start resisting."

"What's more, what comes after we put the brakes on global warming might turn out to be so much better than what we have now… But I'm getting ahead of myself—because nothing is possible unless we stop burning fossil fuels."

George studied the diagram carefully, stroking his chin a little in what he hoped the Director would assume was deep concentration.

"So, our first move in this war against CO_2 is to halt the enemy's advance—and maybe even push it back a little. We need to buy breathing space to figure out what to do next. And we can't wait, because if we don't do something quickly, all of this will be academic—*because we'll all be dead!*"

As you probably guessed, the Director shouted that last bit for emphasis, making George jump. Seeing this, the Director paused momentarily to collect his thoughts and give George a breather.

"As I said earlier," he continued, more calmly now, "I happen to think that despite being unbelievably stupid, humans are also incredibly clever—when we put our minds to it.

"When Kennedy said, 'We choose to go to the Moon' in 1962 [4], he didn't have the first clue how he would do it. But within eight years, Neil Armstrong was hopping around the lunar landscape—and Alan Shepard was hitting golf balls!"

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[4] **President John F. Kennedy's** famous "Moon Speech," underscored the importance of pushing boundaries and taking on challenges that test human ingenuity and resolve.
www.sciencefocus.com

"People thought Kennedy was crazy to make such an outlandish suggestion. Still, they got behind him anyway, and the combined weight and willpower of the American scientific community lined up to deliver on his promise. It just shows what we can do when we pull our fingers out."

George nodded his head to show he was impressed.

"Since then, we've managed to land a robot on an asteroid half a billion miles from Earth, collect rocks from its surface, and bring them back for us to look at in museums. So don't tell me we can't solve climate change. Reducing carbon emissions should be a piece of cake compared to gathering asteroid dust.

"But unfortunately, there's a hitch—because the question is less about whether we *can* solve the problem and more about whether we *want* to. Because right now, we all seem fond of the current system. If you ask me, we're in an abusive relationship, but can't face the thought of an alternative."

The Director finished his speech with a satisfied flourish, carefully laying the paper down in front of George and calmly pressing it flat.

"With me so far?" he asked.

"Yep," replied George, relieved he'd come through this passage of the discussion without injury. "I'm a *Resistance Fighter*, ready to go to war. So where do I sign up?"

"That's the spirit!" replied the Director. "Let me show you."

1.3. – Apparently, We DID Start The Fire

"But before I do that," said the Director, leaning back, "I want you to properly understand the problem — because unless we have a clear idea of what we're up against, we'll only end up addressing the symptoms, not the cause. Does that make sense?"

"I guess so," replied George, disappointed that he wouldn't be getting a straightforward answer there and then, but nodding in agreement just the same.

The Director leaned in closer to George, his eyes alight with zeal. "Great. So first off, I'm going to explain why we're so unwilling to get off our lazy backsides and do something about it."

At this point, the Director sprang out of his chair and began walking around the studio, hands clasped behind his back like a professor delivering a lecture to his undergraduates.

"Was it Schopenhauer or Plato who suggested that love was the defining characteristic of the human species?" asked the Director rhetorically.

George shrugged his shoulders. He hadn't heard of either of them, but it didn't sound like something Pluto would say (after all, Pluto was a dog), so he went for the Schopenhauer option.

"Never mind, it doesn't matter," replied the Director, fearing he might lose his audience if he didn't dumb it down a bit. "I think they both said it in one form or another and, in my humble opinion, they were both wrong.

"Anyone who's owned a dog has felt a dog's love. So no, love is not an emotion unique to humans. In fact, I believe animals feel a purer form of love than most humans anyway— which, as far as I can tell, usually boils down to vanity, infatuation, or insecurity. Love isn't unique to humans, but I'll tell you what is: hubris. Hubris is the thing that really sets us apart. We are the only species that thinks we're superior to everything else… Come to think of it, the fact that we humans assume we're the only species that feels love is a perfect example of our hubris. But I digress...

"I'm also sure we're the only species that feels hate, but I'd contend that hubris is our defining and unique emotion. Hate will have us kill each other, but only hubris will have us kill ourselves."

"That's a great quote! Who said that?" asked curious George.

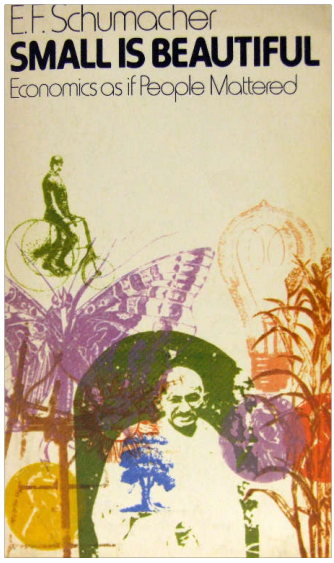
"I did!" replied the Director smugly, and then continued dramatically, "But it was Dostoevsky who said:

'Man, do not pride yourself on your superiority to the animals, for they are without sin, while you, with all your greatness, defile the earth and leave an ignoble trail behind you.' [5]

"And I think it was Hubert Reeves [6] who said: *'Man is the most insane species. He worships an invisible god and destroys visible nature. Unaware that the nature he's destroying is the god he worships*; He was right about that, too".

George was impressed that the Director could seemingly pull quotes from thin air and wondered if he practised them in front of the mirror.

"It wasn't an iceberg that sank the *Titanic*, George, but the *hubris* of a bunch of Edwardian engineers who thought they'd built an unsinkable ship. I guess the iceberg didn't get the memo.



"I first came across *hubris* when I was at *RADA,*" continued the Director, now dreamily reminiscing, "The Greeks loved it; so many plays where humans challenge their gods and get their asses kicked. *'To those whom the Gods wish to destroy, they first make mad'*, as Euripides put it."

This was Greek to George, too, but he decided not to interrupt the Director's flow.

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[5] — Fyodor Dostoyevsky, **The Brothers Karamazov** chapter 41 - **www.online-literature.com**

[6] **Hubert Reeves** — Canadian astrophysicist and populariser of science **www.hubertreeves.info**

"We seem to have forgotten this. We don't respect nature, George. We've been abusing her for the last 200 years, and she's about to deliver some payback. We were warned about it as far back as the 70s when I first read *Small is Beautiful*. E. F. Schumacher [7] told us all about it, and we all bought his book, but we ignored him and kept sleepwalking towards the cliff edge, just like we walked into war in 1939.

"In fact, it occurred to me the other day that the times we're living through now are very similar to the 1930s when Hitler was making a nuisance of himself. He was looking for a fight, but instead of standing up to him, Britain and France chose to appease him, which he took as an invitation to rebuild the German army, occupy the Rhineland and invade Czechoslovakia.

"We even looked the other way when he turned on the Jews, because we couldn't face the idea of another war. Appeasement never works, but we're doing it again. Only this time, our enemy isn't a testicularly challenged dictator [8] but an angry ecosystem looking for payback. And it will swat us like a fly if we don't do something about it fast. And the crazy thing is, we're already at war! Hawaii, California, Canada, and the Greek Islands have all been hit, and if we don't do something right now, it'll soon be raining down fire on the rest of us.

"We ought to be throwing everything we have into a total war effort. Our leaders should be mobilising the whole of society, doing the equivalent of pulling up our iron railings and melting them down to build tanks and donating our pots and pans to be made into Spitfires. We should be *Digging for Victory* and joining the *Home Guard*. But instead, we sit on our arses, turn the TV channel to something less worrying and hope the problem quietly goes away.

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[7] **Small Is Beautiful: A Study of Economics As If People Mattered** is a collection of essays published in 1973 by German—born British economist E. F. Schumacher.

[8] The notion that Hitler only had one testicle is an urban myth, sadly not backed by medical records

"We simply aren't concerned enough. But if we're too lazy or stupid to do it for ourselves, we should at least be doing it for our children and the magnificent planet we live on. It reminds me of that First World War recruitment poster on display at the *Imperial War Museum* in London called *Daddy, What Did You Do in the Great War?"* [9]

It was designed to make fathers feel guilty about not joining up — and we need something similar now. We need to shame people into taking climate change seriously because, in 50 years, our children and grandchildren will look at the state of the world and rightfully ask us, their parents, *what did you do to try to stop it?* That is, if we are still alive in 50 years, which, given the direction the climate is heading in, we can't take for granted.

"Surely, if we're decent human beings with a scintilla of compassion for the generations following us, we should do everything in our power to prevent the awful things that will be happen to them if we just do nothing. But what are we doing instead? We're sitting in front of our televisions thinking about where we want to go on holiday."

"I can't even watch the television these days," confessed George. "I used to love all those wildlife programmes, with that Brit guy, David Attenborough, up to his neck in bat dung."

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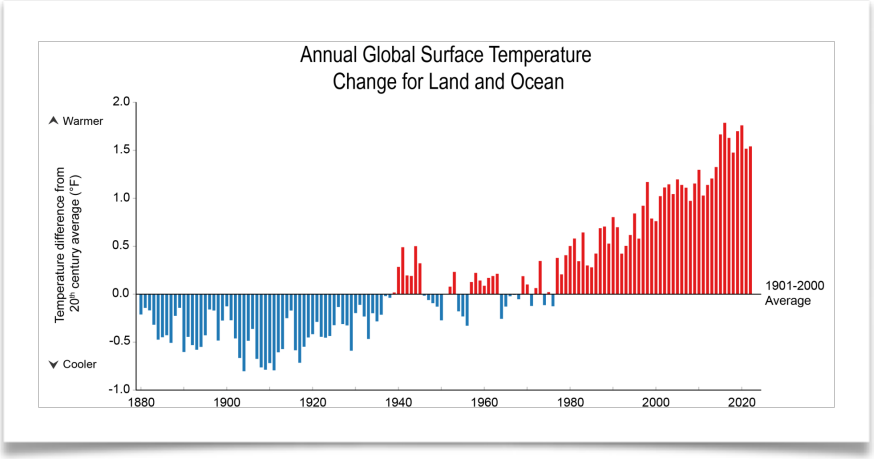
[9] ***Daddy, what did YOU do in the Great War?*** — **Imperial War Museum**

"*Guano!*" exclaimed the Director.
"*Gesundheit*," replied George in earnest before continuing his anecdote, "but then, at the end of the show, Attenborough would tell us this or that species was now on the verge of extinction. It made me so sad I couldn't watch them anymore."
"That's exactly what I'm talking about," agreed the Director, touched by George's sensitivity, "But I'm getting off the subject… What I wanted to say was that, when it comes to the *Climate War,* Poland has already been overrun, and it won't be long before Britain has its Dunkirk moment all over again, by which time it'll all be too late. We'll be under-prepared, out-gunned and on the verge of defeat. Congratulations, you assholes!"
The Director sat down with a thud, 'assholes' left hanging in the air.

1.4: War: What Is It Good For?

After this outburst, the Director fell silent again, realising he'd become overwrought. He took a breath to calm himself. George sat quietly, too, looking into his plastic cup, wondering what was coming next.
"I hate it when I get this upset," said the Director, now more composed, "but when I think about what's happening to our beautiful planet, I get so fucking angry."
"You're right to get angry," said George, supportively.
"Well, George," replied the Director, "if anyone ought to be angry, it's you. As I've said, it was my generation of *Boomers* that caused this mess, and now we're just walking away, leaving you *Gen X, Y* and *Zers* to clean up. If it's not too late, that is." The Director then began to fumble in his pocket, looking for his battered old phone with the cracked screen. "Take a look at this, and if this doesn't scare the living crap out of you, nothing will."



The Director offered George his phone. On the screen was a chart of average global temperatures from the last 100 years [10]:

George examined the chart as the Director explained what he was looking at.

"Last year, the scientists looked at 34,000 climate studies — THIRTY-FOUR THOUSAND! — And concluded, as if we didn't know already, that we are now suffering from intense heatwaves, droughts, wildfires, storms and floods and that much of this is irreversible. FUN FACT: The past 12 months were the hottest year in at least two million years. They also say the window of opportunity for action to prevent disaster is 'brief and closing'. *"Brief and closing,"* reiterated the Director for effect.

"And the heat and the carbon dioxide aren't the worst of it," he continued in an increasingly resigned tone; "The zombie apocalypse will have nothing on what's coming. Before we die of heat exhaustion, there's going to be societal breakdown. Water will be scarce, so we'll fight each other for it. There's going

[10] **Yearly temperature** compared to the twentieth—century average (red bars mean warmer than average, blue bars mean colder than average) from 1850–2022 and atmospheric carbon dioxide amounts (grey line): 1850—1958 from IAC, 1959—2019 from NOAA ESRL. Original graph by Dr. Howard Diamond (NOAA ARL), and adapted by NOAA — **www.climate.gov**

to be massive refugee displacement, which means a lot more boats coming over the English Channel and a lot more so-called illegals climbing over Trump's Wall. Agriculture will fail, food will be unaffordable, and energy will only be for the very rich, who'll guard it with their private militia.

"And here's the irony: in this beautiful capitalist world of the near future, which the politicians seem so keen to sell us, we won't be buying new cars or going on exotic foreign holidays. No, no. We'll be living in fear and scratching for food in the dirt. That, my friend, is the hubris I'm talking about. We're like that ostrich with its head in the sand—only it's worse; our head's in the sand, our ass is pointing at the sky, and there's a firework sticking out of it, burning like a Roman candle. Am I painting a picture of the mess we've created for ourselves?"

George nodded and slumped his shoulders, trying hard not to summon that particular image.

"And that's why I made this movie. Because unless we all do as much as we can—not next year or next month, but RIGHT NOW—we're all going to die a premature and unnecessary death.

"I know people will think I'm being an extremist. They won't want to listen to a crazy old man overreacting to something that will never happen. But that's what they said in 1937. Right now, there are three big truths people are unwilling to confront."

George felt obliged to ask, "What are they?" while simultaneously sensing he didn't really want to know the answer.

"First," replied the Director soberly, "we are facing an unavoidable crisis that will create chaos and anarchy. Second, capitalism is the primary cause of this crisis, and to prevent it, we will have to radically change our lifestyles.

"This is what we're unwilling to confront because it seems so big and uncontrollable. And third, we don't want to give up our dreams of new cars and foreign holidays."

'Jesus!' was all George could think of to say as he quietly mulled over the Director's analysis.

"And why are we going to let ourselves die?" continued the Director, now on a roll. "Not because we don't know what to do. We know why the climate is out of control — and we know what's causing it — so why don't we do something about it?"

Bewildered, George just shook his head.

"Because we're asleep at the wheel, AND IT'S TIME WE WOKE UP!

There was another of those moments of silence as the Director composed himself again.

"And that's the purpose of my film," he said calmly. "It's my attempt to wake us up. *Woke* isn't just about *Black Lives Matter* or trans-gender rights; it's literally about waking up to what we need to do to stop global warming."

The Director then said in a slow and determined voice: "WE — NEED — TO — WAKE — THE — FUCK — UP!"

This certainly woke George up. He felt like a drunk being shaken by the shoulders and being told to sober up. But he still wasn't sure where this conversation was going, and the shouting wasn't exactly helping. Yet, on the other hand, he felt he was starting to come to his senses, if only a little.

Unsure of what to say next, the two sat quietly, looking into their empty plastic cups again.

After perhaps a minute, the Director decided to change the subject: "We're like that frog they put in a pan of hot water," he said reflectively.

"We're eating frog's legs now?" asked George, hoping to lighten the mood.

"Not exactly," laughed the Director. "Too much garlic for me; gives me heartburn. No, I was thinking more about why artists like us must use our imagination to make the world realise we're being boiled alive. We need to wake them up before it's too late."

"I understand," said George, seeing now how he must support this passionate old filmmaking legend in his mission. "We've got to shake people awake. But what do we tell them once we've done that? We can tell them they're in danger, but they'll then need to know what they can do about it. This is the bit that's missing for me. I now see why you made the film and who you made it for, and you've explained how we're just snoozing in front of the TV while our house is on fire. What's the alternative? What do you want me to do about it?"
The Director tried not to look surprised. This was the most coherent sentence he'd heard George utter in the past six months: a perfect summary of the Director's theses to date. George had confronted the danger, agreed on its cause, embraced the urgency of the situation and now seemed willing to do something about it. The Director felt a flicker of optimism. Perhaps there was still hope…

2: Twickenham To Kew – DAZED AND CONFUSED

2.1: Living In A Material World

George and the Director had sat in the slowly emptying studio for over an hour. During this time, various crew members had popped their heads around the door to say goodnight—some waving a cheery "Bye!", others, seeing the Director in deep conversation with the leading man, deciding it wiser not to interrupt.

The Director drained the last of the cheap champagne and realised he felt a little jaded. It had been the end of a long day, and he'd put a lot of effort into an impassioned speech. But mostly, he was tired because whenever he spoke about the imminent climate disaster, he felt drained and depressed. It was a horrible thing to have to keep confronting.

After perhaps a minute of awkward silence, George, slightly embarrassed and a little drunk, thought he'd better break the moment.

"So I guess I'll be getting a cab."

Suddenly, returning to the room, the Director picked up on something he'd been quietly mulling over. "Have you ever seen those Linklater films, George? *Before Sunrise* and *Before Sunset*?"

"And *Before Midnight* [1], replied George, pleased he knew the movies to which the Director was referring. "Wonderful, aren't they? Why do you ask?"

"I like them too," agreed the Director. "So, instead of taking a cab, why don't we walk back along the river to your hotel? You're at Battersea Power Station, aren't you?"

"That's right," confirmed George.

"Great, and while I appreciate I'm no Julie Delpy, you'd make an excellent stand-in for Ethan Hawke, and we could walk and talk, get some fresh air, get a little exercise and shake off the booze. This way, I can tell you the rest of my Dragon story because I've only scratched the surface. What d'ya think?"

"Of course!" replied George enthusiastically. "That sounds like a great idea." He was genuinely relieved because he still didn't have all the answers he needed, and he felt lucky to finally have the chance to spend quality time with the great auteur.

"Grab your coat, then," said the Director, cheerily throwing his own jacket over his shoulder as he headed towards the exit, patting the backs of the few remaining technicians as he walked past.

The cold air hit their faces as they stepped into the dark. After the heat of the studio and the glow of the alcohol, they could feel the autumn dampness being drawn into their lungs, so they both pulled their collars up over their necks in classic Hollywood style.

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[1] **BEFORE MIDNIGHT** — 2013 — Jesse (Ethan Hawke) and Céline (Julie Delpy) first met in their twenties in BEFORE SUNRISE; reunited in their thirties in BEFORE SUNSET; and, now, in director Richard Linklater's BEFORE MIDNIGHT, the couple are on a writer's retreat in Greece, but their idyllic night turns to discussions of what the future holds for them.
www.sonypictures.com

"You see," said the Director, ready to resume his dissertation, "We are living in a sort of dream, and right now, we're sleepwalking towards a cliff edge. It's as if we've been given sleeping pills, but, *spoiler alert,* we've been only too happy to swallow them. In his book *Brave New World*, Aldus Huxley had a similar idea, only he called his sleeping pills *Soma* [2].

"In this collective dream, we're driving new cars and flying first class to exotic destinations, while our kids happily play in our well-kept gardens, while we tell our friends how successful we are. But it isn't real. It's just a dream we keep repeating in our heads.

"We believe that when we finally buy these things, we'll at last be happy, and our friends will envy us because, after all, that's what the advertising has promised us."

George looked at the Director from the corner of his eye to check he was being serious.

"I know it sounds like the plot of *The Matrix*, but I can assure you what I'm describing isn't a million miles from what's really happening in our day-to-day lives. Marx called it *Commodity Fetishism* [3]. Mark Fisher called it *Capitalist Realism* [4]. That's why *The Matrix* was so popular: because, on some level, people knew there was an element of truth to it.

The Director noticed George was still looking sceptical. "From the look on your face, you're probably thinking I'm a conspiracy theorist, and in a minute,

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[2] In Aldous Huxley's 1932 book **Brave New World**, Soma is a hallucinogenic substance provided by the government that causes euphoria, relaxation and escape from reality. It is used to distract from feelings of dissatisfaction while suppressing individuality and critical thinking. www.huxley.net

[3] **Commodity Fetishism** — Marx argued that in capitalist societies, commodities become imbued with social power and significance and that we often fetishise them, valuing them for what they represent in terms of status rather than the labour that went into making them. www.marxists.org

[4] **Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?** Fisher argues that capitalism has permeated every aspect of modern life, shaping not only economic structures but also our culture, politics, and even our sense of self. k—punk.abstractdynamics.org

I'm going to try to convince you the moon landings were faked, that the Royal Family are lizards [5] and that Donald Trump won the 2020 election. But, in a way, what I'm saying is even more outlandish than that because, unlike in *The Matrix,* this isn't science fiction. I honestly think we've chosen to stay asleep and enjoy our *consumer dreams* rather than wake up and face the truth."

"Come on, Sir, are you being serious? Are you telling me we'd rather die than face the facts?" George wasn't buying it.

"Yes, George, that's exactly what I'm saying. Remember the Dragon and how you had to show him he was an addict and needed therapy?"

George nodded, recalling that scene.

"Well, the same thing happens in real life — and it's going to take a lot for me to make you realise you're an addict."

"I'm going to need some convincing," confirmed George. "It sounds like the screenplay of every bad dystopian movie I've appeared in over the past ten years!" he continued, charmingly self-deprecating.

"I know," replied the Director. "It always does. And the deck is stacked against me. So this is what I'm going to do: First, I'll explain the problem: SPOILER ALERT, it's capitalism, stupid. Then, I'll take capitalism off its pedestal and walk you through its less-than-stellar history. Then, I'll show you just what an out-of-control monster it's become. And finally, if you're still awake and have not thrown me in the river, I'll offer a few ideas on how to save the world".

"Holy Cow! That sounds like a lot of information!" thought George. "I hope I can take it all in," but what actually came out of his mouth was, "Super interesting! Can't wait!" While enthusiastically clapping his hands together. "Let's get to it!"

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[5] The Royal Family are bloodsucking alien lizards - David Icke **www.scotsman.com**

2.2: Working for the Man

"OK," said the Director, buoyed by George's continued enthusiasm, while pulling his scarf under his chin to keep out the increasingly damp night. "I think it's safe to say that capitalism has been the predominant driver of world affairs for the past 200 years. It's bigger than me and you, and bigger even than individual countries. It's even bigger than religion.

"I suppose you could argue that China or Russia aren't capitalist systems, but you'd be wrong. Russia is a kleptocracy of rampant corruption which, you might say, is the logical end state of any capitalist system. As for China, the Chinese Communist Party may still run it, but that's only in name. The reality is that it only became the world's second-largest economy when it started *CHASING MONEY!*"

The Director emphasised the final two words with relish.

"This is hardly contentious. There's an army of right-wing economists and politicians who'd be proud to endorse every word I've just said. They'd also argue that capitalism increases global life expectancy and lifts people out of poverty. And while all of this may, indeed, be true, the fact is, we'll never know how things might have turned out if we'd taken a different path.

"So I hope you can see that our little movie isn't a polemic against capitalism. It isn't an ideological rant. In fact, I'd go as far as to say this isn't even about politics."

At this, George rolled his eyes dubiously. The Director noticed, but ignored him and pressed on.

"I'm not anti-anything—apart from maybe being anti-avoidable mass extinction. But unless there's a massive shift away from free-market dragon economics in the very near future, that's exactly what we can expect. This is important to emphasise because when it comes to criticising capitalism,

people get defensive very quickly—and if we do that, we won't get anywhere."

"Sure, I might be rude about those billionaires who increasingly meddle in our daily lives, but simply blaming them is a pointless exercise—because they're not the problem. They're just a symptom of a system that's killing us. That would be like blaming the rats for causing the Black Death or saying malaria was caused by 'bad air'."

"So, what is malaria caused by?" asked George, now confused.

"Mosquitoes!" replied the Director, looking at George to check if he was being serious. "Mosquitoes cause malaria, George, even though *mal–aria* literally means 'bad air'!"

"I knew that," replied George, hoping to sound like he'd just remembered.

"Anyway, the point I'm making is that we spend so much energy arguing over who's to blame that it distracts us from the real problem."

"Which is?" asked George, hoping to recover his credibility.

"That our enemies aren't the capitalists selling us stuff we don't need—it's our own selfish natures, wanting to buy that stuff when we *know* it's killing us."

"Ah!" said George, hoping to sound as though he'd understood all along.

"The problem isn't political; it's just a lack of plain old common sense. I might agree with Marx about a lot of things, but that doesn't mean I want to start a class war. I'm just a human who doesn't want to die sooner than I have to. Why bother with a class war when the climate is doing the job perfectly well on our behalf?

The climate isn't political. It doesn't discriminate. It's just as happy killing the rich as the poor. And if you think your money will save you, well you're delusional, and you probably deserve a *Darwin Award* [6]. That's why we should

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[6] The **Darwin Awards** are a satirical "honour" given to individuals who contribute to human evolution by removing themselves from the gene pool due to their own extraordinarily foolish actions. **https://darwinawards.com/**

all think carefully about this and see the futility of turning this into an argument about politics. That's just going to distract us from the real issues."
This was getting more political than George had anticipated when he agreed to this walk, and it was making him a tad uncomfortable. He was a multi-millionaire with two houses, eight cars, a ski lodge in Telluride, and two failed marriages to finance. But he knew there was no getting out of it now, so he gritted his teeth, put his head down and tuned his ears into 'listening mode.'
"Sure," continued the Director, unaware of George's concerns. "At one time, the free-market dragon capitalists were happy to claim that a little inequality was the price you paid for improving living standards and increasing life expectancy; enter them in the asset column of the global balance sheet if you like. However, the benefits of capitalism have surely reached their limits when you then look at the debit column and see an item in red labelled *Mass Extinction Event* [7].
"It's funny: Lenin assumed the *bourgeoisie* [8] would die at the hands of the *Bolsheviks* [9]; what he didn't predict was the demise of capitalism at the hands of an irritated ecosystem that had simply had enough of man's hubris and arrogance. Who knew Marxism and climate change had so much in common?
"That reminds me of something," speculated George, still trying to impress the Director by searching through his chaotic memory bank like a librarian flicking through a box file.
The Director could almost hear the cogs whirring in George's brain.

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[7] There have been five unusually **mass extinction events** in Earth's history. A growing number of scientists note that Earth is in the midst of a sixth, driven by human activities—
www.britannica.com

[8] The ***Bourgeoisie*** refers to the capitalist class in Marxist theory, comprising individuals who own and control the means of production, such as factories, businesses, and land.

[9] The term ***Bolshevik*** means "majority" in Russian. During the Russian Revolution the Bolsheviks advocated for the overthrow of the capitalist system and The Establishment of a socialist state led by the working class.

"It's like an *Aesop's Fable* we read in kindergarten," George eventually exclaimed.

"Really?" asked the Director, genuinely intrigued. "How so?"

"Well," began George, trying hard to recall the story accurately, "one day, the North Wind and the Sun were arguing about which was stronger. So they made a bet to see who could get a man to take off his coat.

"The Wind tried first by blowing a gale, but this only made the man wrap his coat around himself even tighter. Then it was the Sun's turn. Only this time, he took a gentler approach, warming the man's back, and the man quickly removed his coat and fell asleep in the shade of a tree."

George finished his story with a little bow.

"So are you saying that the unusual weather we're having now will persuade us to change our ways?" asked the Director, still unsure of George's point.

"I guess so," said George, sounding a little uncertain. "But what it really made me think is that the North Wind is like communism—trying to remove the coat by force—while the Sun is more like common sense, encouraging the man to take off his coat because it's what he wants to do. It reminded me of what you were saying, because I always thought the moral of the story was that persuasion is more effective than violence."

The Director was impressed. George had turned his complex political argument into something a child could understand.

"That's exactly right!" said the Director approvingly, patting George on the shoulder. "We're not trying to start a violent revolution—we just need to see that a better future is waiting for us, if we're willing to look. But the problem is: how do we get people to see?"

Unable to solve this puzzle, George shook his head slightly.

"You see," continued the Director, hoping to persuade George that his ideas were not to be feared but embraced, "capitalism is a sort of social operating system, in the same way that *Microsoft Windows* is a computer operating

system. One determines how a computer works, while the other determines how society works.

"Come to think of it, this is a pretty good analogy on several levels," said the Director, thinking aloud. "Because, like *Windows*, which runs on about 80% of the world's PCs, capitalism might be the world's dominant economic system, but that doesn't necessarily mean it's the best.

"For a long time, *Windows* was just one of many operating systems you'd use to drive your PC. It wasn't necessarily the best, but it was the one everyone else seemed to be using, so we all used it without thinking. Microsoft wasn't necessarily the best, but Bill Gates and his team were more politically astute, ruthless and business savvy than the competition, and they cut the best deals with retailers, shutting out or buying up the competition, pinching the better ideas from other operators like *Apple* and of course, spending shitloads of money on advertising. As a result, it eventually came to dominate the market even though, in many ways, it wasn't the best system.

"It's exactly the same reason we're still using fossil fuels. We could have transitioned to cleaner forms of energy decades ago but that didn't happen because the oil and gas companies were making far too much money selling us dirty energy, and they weren't about to give that up. What's more, they had infinitely more money than any smaller, greener competitors trying to enter the market, so whenever a cleaner energy alternative appeared, they'd simply shut them down or buy them up. Anything to avoid the threat of losing their magic money tree. Their *cash-cow.* And, what's more, they'd do all this despite knowing this would be bad for the planet in the longer term and, in the end, even threaten humanity's survival. After all, a small matter of climate catastrophe wouldn't stop the legacy energy firms from maximising their profits. And I can assure you, George, I am not exaggerating or making any of this shit up."

In the face of this extended tirade, George thought it best to keep his mouth shut and just keep walking, though he did think a few *PowerPoint* slides might have helped.

"And, just like *Microsoft Windows*, which seemed like a good idea back in the 1980s, capitalism was designed for a very different world we live in today. Back then, computers were only beginning to move out of offices and into peoples' homes, so it would be difficult to know what the future would look like. It's much harder for the oil and coal companies to claim the same; they knew what they were doing wasn't right. Science was telling us that burning fossil fuels would warm up the planet, but they didn't care about any of that. In fact, they were more than happy to hide or challenge any information that might threaten their dividends and bonuses. We've known about the dangers of too much carbon in the atmosphere for a hundred years, but we chose to ignore it, which wouldn't be so bad if we were still talking about computer software. I'm sure we could all live with the inconvenience of a computer that takes ten minutes to boot up. But when free-market dragon capitalists suppress any information that might affect their profits, we all end up being boiled alive!"

George made the noise of a balloon slowly deflating as the enormity of the problem slowly dawned on him. For ten minutes, he wished he'd taken that warm, dark cab back to his hotel, but instead, he'd agreed to walk beside a diminutive, highly animated septuagenarian Scotsman raging against *The System* and he knew he still had a long way to go.

2.3: Don't Look Back In Anger

Noticing that George was now looking a little browbeaten, the Director decided to try for something a little more upbeat. "But, like I said before, we aren't going to fix this problem by simply moaning about it and blaming the

capitalists. That's a waste of time and energy, and it's what they'd want us to do anyway.

"It's too easy to blame ego-maniac CEOs, greedy bankers and corrupt politicians, satisfying though it would be to throw rotten cabbages at them. They are just a symptom of a system built on Status, Power & Money (S.P.A.M). Since their first day at public school, these CEOs have been brainwashed into believing that *Greed is Good* and, rather conveniently, that by being greedy and selfish, they were somehow creating a more equitable, prosperous world where a rising tide lifts all boats. I shit you not. So, how can we now blame them for turning out the way they have? Sure, there are winners and losers in the game of capitalism, but we have to address the game itself, not the players.

"Here in the West, we celebrate *Status, Power & Money* (S.P.A.M), and we look up to those who are winning the game with envy, as though they were outstanding examples of what we could become. The likes of Musk, Bezos, Zuckerberg, and the half-man, half-goat that is Richard Branson are venerated as some sort of latter-day saints. Yet, when you look closely at each of them, you see a very strange group of individuals who, if you met them under any other circumstance, you might assume were sociopaths. What's more, almost without exception, most were not genius inventors or even sophisticated business strategists but just a bunch of 'lucky' punters who happened to have been in the right place at the right time. Sure, they love to claim their story is one of rags-to-riches, but usually fail to mention they also received a lot of help along the way, either via wealthy parents or sheer dumb luck. Most of the current crop of billionaires simply placed their chips on the roulette wheel of business at just the right time. In contrast, thousands of other budding entrepreneurs were less lucky, betting on black just before the ball stopped on red, but we never hear about them: For every Bezos, there are a dozen bankrupts that will never make the cover of Forbes. In fact, without Daddy's

millions or a ton of good fortune, Musk, Bezos, and Zuckerberg might now be working at your local supermarket, scanning groceries and asking if you've had a nice day. And no one would be giving them a second thought. As the old joke goes, what *would Zuckerberg be now if he wasn't a billionaire?*"

"*A virgin?"* replied George, chuckling to himself.

"Yet middle managers like the George you play in our movie aspire to emulate these narcissistic oddballs. Kids watch them on *YouTube* and hang on every word they utter in their syndicated podcasts. People look up to Donald Trump for chrissakes! He's the President of the United States AGAIN! And doesn't that tell us everything we need to know about our distorted capitalist system?"

"Amen to that," confirmed George.

"So who can blame the capitalists for sticking to the script and following *The Establishment* [10] playbook? After all, it's working out pretty well for them. But it would be wrong to think they're the source of our problems; they're just the symptom. They're just a distraction."

"You see, George, and this is the most important thing I will say today," continued the Director, stopping abruptly and grabbing George's arm to make sure he stopped too, "The problem isn't *OUT THERE,"* he said, pointing to the skyscrapers of London's dockland in the distance. "The problem is *IN HERE*", which the Director emphasised by hitting his chest several times with his fist. "The capitalists inside us all make these billionaires even richer. We all have a selfish dragon inside, wanting to be just as rich and powerful as they are, but if we want to survive the next 30 years, we will have to slay our personal dragon! It's a bit like realising that, after a lifetime of trying to ignore it, we finally realise we've been in an abusive relationship and decided it's time to get out."

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[10] **"The Establishment"** refers to the dominant group in society that holds power, influence, and authority, often in politics, business, media, and institutions. It represents the traditional ruling elite and the structures that maintain the status quo. **https://politicaldictionary.com**

"Wow!" thought George, feeling he might have finally reached the conclusion of the Director's thesis and that all of his outstanding questions would now be answered. "But this is the bit I still don't understand: I can see how the Dragon has an unhealthy addiction to power, and I can sure see that he'll try to cling to that power if he can. But I don't understand how the Dragon I crawled out of in the movie is also the dragon inside myself."
"Well, that's the sixty-four-thousand-dollar question," replied the Director. "Patience, my boy, all will be revealed in the fourth act. But first, we need to explore how capitalism got us into this mess in the first place. Is that a deal?"
"Deal," agreed George, inviting the Director to continue while smugly knowing he didn't get out of bed for a paltry sixty-four thousand dollars.

2.4: Money, Money, Money

After a few moments of reflection, George asked, "But can we *really* blame capitalism? Are we really about to be boiled alive by the climate?"
"Yes!" shouted back the Director emphatically, unwilling to take back his statement. "And here's the proof: we've got to the point in our evolution when we're about to commit suicide, and you don't have to take my word for it. This existential threat we've created even has a name. It's called *The Anthropocene*[11], which describes the period we're living through now. You know, with its exponential population growth, industrialisation, intensive agriculture, deforestation, and greenhouse gases. All of this means that our planet — the one we're currently standing on — is heating up like a rotisserie

[11] **The Anthropocene** is the common name for a proposed geological epoch, dating from the commencement of significant human impact on Earth up to the present day. **www.nature.com**

chicken. Scientists call it the *Great Acceleration* [12], or, as I like to think of it, capitalism's club foot putting the pedal to the metal. The ecosystem of our precious planet is like an elastic band that's been stretched as far as it can, and it's about to snap back into our faces. And I can tell you, that's going to sting.

"And I know what you're wondering," continued the Director. "You're wondering whether the *Anthropocene* could have happened under any other type of economic system. Could these conditions *have only* been created by capitalism? And that's a fair question; and all I can answer is that we'll never know. But I *can* tell you that what we are dealing with now is most definitely capitalism's fault."

This surprised George because he'd been thinking about woolly mammoths and wondered whether they existed during the *Anthropocene Age.*

"What I do know is that if right-wing economists and politicians are happy to claim that capitalism has been the key driver of human activity for the past 250 years, then they must also take responsibility for the misery, pollution, and environmental destruction it's caused as well."

George concurred with a quick nod of his head.

"Let's be frank: Capitalism has caused global warming because, to succeed, capitalists need to keep making profits and to do that, they need to keep growing their business. That's a baked-in rule of the system, which means that, since the *Industrial Revolution* [13], more and more fossil fuels have been

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[12] **The Great Acceleration** refers to a period of dramatic growth in human activity and environmental change that began around the mid—20th century, including population growth, economic expansion, energy consumption, resource extraction, technological innovation, carbon dioxide emissions, deforestation, and biodiversity loss. The concept highlights the interconnectedness of these developments and their cumulative effects on the planet, raising concerns about the sustainability of life on Earth, given these trends. **www.futureearth.org**

[13] **The Industrial Revolution** began in Great Britain around 1760 and spread quickly across Europe and North America, triggered by the invention of steam—driven machines making mass production possible. It created a mass working class and the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of industrialists, leading to massive economic growth, but also the exploitation of workers and environmental degradation. **www.fordham.edu**

burned to feed this relentless growth. And because economies must keep growing, the problem obviously keeps growing, too.

"And it doesn't take a genius to know that while the world might be a vast place, it isn't infinite and, eventually, it must run out of the materials capitalism needs to sustain itself: if it doesn't asphyxiate itself first. The rules of capitalism mean that rival businesses are in a never-ending competition with each other, with the winner grabbing as much of the market as it can until there's nothing left. Presumably, the winner is the last man standing. Nothing gets shared. Nothing gets rationed.

"You've just described a game of *Hungry Hippos!*" exclaimed George, innocently surprised.

"That's right!" agreed the Director. "Personally, it reminds me of that TV show *Supermarket Sweep*. Do you get *Supermarket Sweep* in the States?"

"Er, I'm not sure," replied George. "I don't think so."

"Does the name *Dale Winton* mean anything to you?" persisted the Director.

"Was he in *The Power of the Dog?"* asked George hopefully.

"I don't think so," replied the Director. "But never mind. Where was I?"

"Capitalism," replied George. "Capitalism and competition."

"Yes, yes!" replied the Director, climbing back onto his train of thought. "Good to see that you're paying attention, George!"

George appreciated this compliment.

"You see, the problem with competition is that everyone is out for themselves, and this, quite frankly, is a recipe for disaster," explained the Director, pausing momentarily and shaking his head in disbelief. "I mean, where else do we try to *outdo* someone else? We might want to defeat someone at football or table tennis, but when one team wins and the other loses, we all shake hands and share a pint. However, in capitalism, if we win, we can put food on our plates, but if we lose, we go hungry. What's more, if we win, we're not just putting food on our family's plates; we are literally taking it from someone else's.

Whoever thought this could be a sensible way to run a society? If a monkey hoarded more bananas than he could eat, leaving the other monkeys to starve, scientists would label him a psychopath and try to understand what was wrong with him. Yet, when humans do it, we put them on the cover of *Forbes* magazine."

This description sounded weirdly distorted to George; he couldn't believe capitalism could be so flawed, but, on the other hand, he couldn't find a weakness in the Director's argument either. He even began to wonder whether the booze and fatigue were playing with his head.

"Anyway, the point is," continued the Director, who sounded as though he might be winding up this particular cogitation, "All this need for profit and growth and competition means we're trying to get a quart out of a pint pot, as we used to say when I was a kid. Do people still use idioms like that?"

"I think we use *memes* instead these days," advised George, happy to have the opportunity to contribute.

"I stand corrected," replied the Director, bowing slightly.

"But what is relevant is that we're taking more from the Earth than the Earth can give, and it's killing us. Capitalism is a zero-sum game; in the end, nobody wins. But because it seems to have worked in the past and no one has yet suggested a better idea, and because no one seems able to stop it, it just keeps growing, like cancer, pushing us closer to the cliff edge."

"Jeez!" replied George, unsure what else to say. He could see the Director was 100% committed to these ideas, but still couldn't quite bring himself to accept all this might be true.

"If what you say is true," suggested George tentatively, "perhaps the problem isn't knowing all of this but not knowing what to do about it."

"That's right," confirmed the Director, pleased they were still, more or less, on the same page.

"And I'll come to that, but first, if we want to find our way out of this mess, we need to understand how we got here in the first place."

The twinkling of street lights dancing on the water provided a soothing contrast to the bright studio lights they'd endured all day. They both fell into their private thoughts for a moment, but it wasn't long before the Director, concerned that he still had much to cover, returned to his critique.

"Alright, so far, I've explained how an unfortunate side-effect of capitalism is that it eventually causes catastrophic system failure. I also know you're keen to understand how we can stop it. But before I do that, I think it's important to provide a little bit of historical context because unless I can remove any remaining doubts about capitalism being somehow still '*the only way*', then we won't feel 100% committed to finding another answer."

George was disappointed to hear this. He was ready to flick to the last page of this thriller to discover who did it, but he could see little option but to go along with the Director's wishes.

"This isn't something that's generally taught in school," continued the earnest Scotsman, "and we're definitely not encouraged to consider capitalism as just one of many economic systems we might decide to use."

"Funny, but I guess you're right about that," agreed George, turning this idea over in his mind for the first time.

"So, I'm going to take you back to the origins of modern economics if you're up for that?"

"Do I have a choice?" asked George playfully.

"Not really," grinned the Director.

"Now, if we look at how capitalism is the big deal it is today, it's easy to assume it's been around forever. But it's quite a recent phenomenon.

"People only started thinking about it towards the end of the 18th Century, which, to put it in context, was around the same time as the *American War of Independence* (1776) and the *French Revolution* (1789—1799). Before that, in

the mid—1700s, countries traded with each other using a weird system called *mercantilism,* and before that, what little international trade there was was based on good old-fashioned *feudalism*.

"So, first, as I say, there was *feudalism* [14], which lasted for about 500 years and was, effectively, just a form of patronage, a sort of *'you scratch my back, and I'll scratch yours,*' set up where the king or queen bought the loyalty of their barons by giving them land. We still see this sort of thing today when British politicians put their friends and backers into the House of Lords. Meanwhile, the serf and peasants, who came as a job lot with these gifts of land, bartered their goods and services with each other at a local level to make ends meet.

"The *feudal* system worked OK for centuries because, back then, countries didn't trade with 'foreigners' too much. But when international trade began to pick up in the 16th Century, feudalism and bartering simply couldn't keep up. I mean, the king could hardly start giving land to Johnny Foreigner. So, over the next couple of hundred years, something called *Mercantilism* slowly began to take its place. In this crude economic scenario, individual countries began to specialise in selling the stuff they were good at making. For example, the English produced the finest wool, while the Dutch manufactured excellent lace and the Portuguese had the climate to grow the best grapes for wine. And, out of these specialisms developed an elaborate system of 'swapsies' in which the French would exchange their fine furniture for English wool, who, in turn, would swap their wool for Portuguese booze. And everyone muddled along as though they were playing an enormous game of *Happy Families*. But, unfortunately, as in any zero-sum game like *Happy Families*, it quickly becomes obvious that you can only win when someone else loses, and when

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[14] **Feudalism** was the dominant social structure in Europe from the 9th to the 15th century: The king was at the top, followed by nobles, vassals, and peasants (serfs) who worked the land. Serfs were bound to the land and owed labor and other dues to their lords in exchange for protection.
The Foundations of Western Civilization

each country tries so hard to win by keeping hold of their best 'cards', no one wins, and everyone loses. They were all cutting off their nose to spite their faces. Eventually, some Enlightenment thinkers in France, known as the *Physiocrats* [15], suggested that when countries put their differences aside, worked together, and cooperated, the net benefit was more significant than if trade was restricted."

"Like the EU then?" asked George innocently.

"Very much like the EU," agreed the Director, "and this switch from isolationism and tariffs to cooperation and the free-flowing trade between countries became known as *laissez-faire* economics [16]."

"I see," said George, trying to keep up with the history lesson.

"Fast forward to 1776, and you have my great fellow countryman, Adam Smith[17], to blame for what came next. He published *The Wealth of Nations* [18] in that year, in which he explained what he believed were the underlying forces influencing how and why people and countries traded with each other. They called him the *Father of Economics* for this. Keep your eye on him because his name crops up much more later in the story. With me so far?"

George nodded, relieved at least to be no longer discussing politics.

"Shall I continue?" asked the Director.

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[15] **The Physiocrats** represent the beginning of the anti—mercantilist movement. France did not have colonies like England or Holland and therefor the only commodity it had in excess was food production, putting it at a disadvantage. **www.newworldencyclopedia.org**

[16] **Laissez—faire economics** is an economic philosophy that advocates minimal government intervention, allowing market forces to operate freely without regulation or interference.

[17] **Adam Smith (1723–1790)** was a Scottish economist, philosopher, and author who is often regarded as the 'father of modern economics' and 'the father of capitalism'. His most famous work, "The Wealth of Nations," published in 1776, laid the foundations for classical economics and remains one of the most influential books in the field. **www.bbc.co.uk/history**

[18] **The Wealth of Nations**, by Scottish economist and philosopher Adam Smith, published in 1776, became a foundational study in the history of economics and the first formulation of a comprehensive system of political economy. **www.britannica.com**

"Please do," replied George.

"OK. So Smith thought he could see an underlying pattern to the way people were trading with each other, and, in particular, he believed that when people were motivated by selfishness, some inexplicable alchemy occurred, which meant that, eventually, the whole of society would benefit. He called this the *Invisible Hand of the Market* [19].

"For example, Smith assumed that when an entrepreneur wanted to expand his business (and, by the way, business owners at this time were almost exclusively male), he'd need to hire more workers and, to do that, he'd need to pay these new employees more than they were currently being paid elsewhere, meaning they'd benefit as well. Sounds like a *win-win*, right?"

"Sure does," confirmed George.

"Unfortunately, there was just one tiny little itty-bitty fly in this ointment because, for Adam Smith's beautiful system to work, the workers needed the freedom to find another gig if they weren't being paid enough. And this is where it all goes downhill because, for the next 250 years, businessmen focused on maximising profits while squeezing worker rights and wages, which was pretty obviously a raw deal for the workers, who were now trapped in a chess game where they were nothing more than pawns.

"In essence, the capitalists had turned what Adam Smith had needed one thousand pages to explain into one short sentence: *Greed is Good.* It's the Gordon Gekko line from the 1987 movie *Wall Street* [20]. Gekko conveniently *Tipp-Ex'd* out the bit in the *Wealth of Nations* where Adam Smith also insisted that the *workers must be protected from monopolies."*

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[19] **The Invisible Hand** is perhaps the most important—and most controversial—metaphor in economics." **www.adamsmithworks.org**

[20] **Wall Street** (1987) directed and co—written by Oliver Stone and starring Michael Douglas and Charlie Sheen. **www.imdb.com**

Feeling rather chuffed that he'd explained capitalism in two sentences, the Director paused to see how his young student had reacted. George, meanwhile, was puzzling over what *Tipp-Ex* might be, so the director took a different tack.

"It's the law of unintended consequences," the Director remarked. "Adam Smith surely didn't intend to trigger an ecological disaster that now threatens civilisation. Just as Gutenberg [21] could never know he'd be indirectly responsible for millions of pornographic websites, he had made the internet possible by inventing the printing press. And, by the same token, Adam Smith couldn't know that, by proposing the *Invisible Hand*, he was making unchecked capitalism seem like a rational way to run the planet."

This analogy made George snort a little with glee.

"I like to think that if he'd known what sort of shitshow he'd set in motion, Smith would have done what Alec Guinness acted out in *The Bridge Over The River Kwai* [22]; uttered the immortal words, *What have I done?* and blown the whole thing up!

2.5: This Charming Man

George noticed how this stretch of the river they were now walking beside was flanked by grand Victorian warehouses, power stations and factories, now, of course, all converted into up-market apartments. This seemed appropriate, given his mentor was now banging on about obscure historical figures who were probably responsible for their original industrial function.

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[21] **Johannes Gutenberg** invented the movable-type printing press around **1440** **www.gutenberg-foundation.com**

[22] **The Bridge on the River Kwai** (1957) British POWs are forced to build a railway bridge across the river Kwai for their Japanese captors in occupied Burma, not knowing that the Allied forces are planning a daring commando raid through the jungle to destroy it. **www.imdb.com**

"But I'm willing to cut Adam Smith some slack," continued the Director, snapping George back into the present. "We've got to remember that Smith was scribbling away with a quill pen when he wrote *The Wealth of Nations,* and the Industrial Revolution hadn't yet begun to bite. So he couldn't possibly know that, in just 40 years, William Blake would be looking out over *dark Satanic Mills*. It's incredible how quickly things can change once dragon capitalism is given free rein to chase after money.

"You see, Adam Smith wasn't a bad person, but his outlook and worldview were shaped by the times he lived in. Back then, slavery was a legitimate business opportunity. Organisations such as the *British East India Company* [23] were allowed to recruit private armies, which they used, in the case of the East India Company, to subjugate whole continents in the name of British trade: All perfectly reasonable opportunities for the Britain of Adam Smith, even if he took a dim view of it himself."

George, ever eager to contribute, chimed in. "I get that; times change. Some things seem reasonable at the time, but when you look back, you can't believe you ever thought it was OK. I mean, there was a time when I thought Kanye West had something significant to contribute to US politics. How the hell could I have taken an asshole like that seriously?'

"Exactly!" exclaimed the Director, encouraged by George's application of the discussion to his own life, even if his examples seemed painfully crass.

"Don't get me wrong, Smith was way ahead of his time regarding human rights. He'd have probably been considered *woke* by the *Adam Smith Institute*

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[23] **The East India Company** — established in 1600 by English merchants backed by the British government, operated as a quasi—governmental entity, with its own army, administration, and judiciary, effectively ruling large parts of India for nearly two centuries. The company interfered in local politics, overthrowing rulers to further its own interests, forcing indigenous populations to cultivate cash crops, contributing to poverty and famine. The company's monopoly on trade led to corruption, nepotism and abuse of power in both India and Britain and played a pivotal role in shaping the British Empire. **www.nationaltrust.org**

[24], which is ironic given how it abuses the great man's name in pursuit of its right-wing agenda.

"Back then, the Earth seemed boundless. The global population was still less than one billion, and vast tracts of land had yet to be discovered. So it would be churlish to expect Adam Smith to foresee just how influential his cherished capitalist ideas would be on the desecration of the planet.

"But I can't let Smith off the hook entirely. He was, after all, criminally naive if he thought unscrupulous capitalists wouldn't use his ideas to ride roughshod over the human and natural world.

"As he said himself: *Despite being selfish and wanting to gratify their own vain and insatiable desires, the rich are led by an invisible hand which makes nearly the same distribution of the necessaries of life that would have been made had the earth been divided equally among all its inhabitants* [25].

"What a load of bullshit! Given half a chance, people are greedy and will grab whatever they can get hold of, and Smith's ideas simply gave them permission to be as greedy as they could get away with. As the *Industrial Revolution* unfolded, we quickly discovered just how greedy and debased men could be when given such permission. Unrestrained avarice allowed them to commit unspeakable horrors against other human beings and the planet, with the genocide of entire societies and the extinction of whole species being just the tip of the iceberg. And, of course, to most industrialists and dragon capitalists of the time, the working class was just another resource to be exploited and, if need be, destroyed in the name of profits and growth."

"Nor can we expect Smith to have fully grasped what this would mean for the planet even though, as early as 1896, a Swedish chemist named Svante

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[24] The **Adam Smith Institute** — a think tank that promotes neoliberal and free market ideas. **www.adamsmith.org**

[25] A **paraphrase** of Adam Smith quoted in "The Wealth of Nations." In Book IV, Chapter II of "The Wealth of Nations" **wikisource.org**

Arrhenius predicted that high levels of CO_2 in the atmosphere would trigger global warming [26]. But, of course, no one was in the mood to listen back then, not when there was so much money to be made."

2.6. You're As Cold As Ice

"It's easy to assume Adam Smith was uncovering some universal law when developing his ideas for the Wealth of Nations, but this was one of the flaws in *Enlightenment* thinking. You see, all those brilliant, rational scientists had a hunch that the universe was a sort of machine they could understand if they took it apart and examined all the *bits*.

"It wasn't called the *Age of Reason* [27] for nothing. Newton had used rational mathematics to predict the movement of planets correctly, and this had fooled his peers into assuming that all the universe's secrets could be unlocked through cool observation and experimentation, something that came to be known as the *Scientific Method.* [28]"

"*The Scientific Method?"* Asked George, intrigued, *"*As opposed to what?"

*"*As opposed to *just making shit up* based on religion and superstition, which is pretty much what had happened before then. Isaac Newton's success made it

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[26] **'Svante Arrhenius — the Man Who Foresaw Climate Change'**. In 1896, Arrhenius published a paper titled "On the Influence of Carbonic Acid in the Air upon the Temperature of the Ground," in which he proposed the theory that human activities, specifically the burning of fossil fuels such as coal, could lead to an increase in carbon dioxide levels. Hi ideas were ahead of their time, and it took several decades to gain recognition and acceptance within the scientific community. **www.bbvaopenmind.com**

[27] **The Age of Reason —** also known as the Enlightenment, was an intellectual and cultural movement that took place in Europe and the Americas during the 17th and 18th centuries. This period marked a shift in thinking, emphasising reason, science, and rational inquiry over traditional religious beliefs and superstitions. **www.khanacademy.org**

[28] **The Scientific Method** — is a systematic approach used by scientists to investigate phenomena, acquire knowledge, and test hypotheses through empirical observation and experimentation. **www.britannica.com**

easy to believe there was a way to unlock the puzzle and become masters of the universe. A bit like the instructions you get with an *IKEA* flatpack. But all that fell apart when Einstein came along…"

"Nice bagels," observed George, unsure how this was relevant.

The Director, confused but undeterred, continued. " … with a new approach which explained gravity more accurately than Newtonian physics. Comparing Newton to Einstein would be like comparing a cassette tape with *Spotify*. So let's hear it for Einstein!"

"Yeah! Go, Einstein!" cheered George with muted enthusiasm.

"And just as Newton's ideas proved simplistic when he presumed the universe functioned like a clock, Adam Smith was equally naive when he claimed a universal truth based on the benefits of a selfish society; it was nothing of the sort. In fact, his theories were merely a predictable snapshot of the dog-eat-dog attitudes of 18th-century Europe. Not that you'd know it, given how modern right-wing economists continue to idolise his every utterance all these years later, at least the sections of his treatise that suit them. The world has moved on since then, and how we humans interact has moved on, too. Yet, his central notion — that individuals work best together when they act selfishly — still drives economics and politics as if it were an undeniable truth."

"So we've ended up falling in line behind an idea that isn't necessarily true?" asked George, needing to double-check what he was hearing.

"Yup," the Director responded curtly. "We used to believe the Earth was flat, but then, some brave soul tested the theory and discovered the world was, in fact, round. A flat earth is just irrational horseshit, and the idea that only capitalism can save the planet is horseshit too."

"Jesus, when you put it like that, it does sound crazy!" said George, taken aback. Next to him was a short, portly Scotsman chattering away, ten to the dozen, and here he was, a spoilt, cosseted actor plodding along a poorly lit

towpath in a city he barely knew, wondering how much further they'd have to walk before he could order a steak.

George furtively checked the time on his half-million-dollar *Richard Mille* [29] skeleton watch. It felt about eleven, but he wasn't sure. Maybe it just seemed like they'd been walking for days. But it was dark, so he couldn't see the tiny hands on its diamond-encrusted watch face.

"You're right. It really is crazy," replied the Director, bringing George back into the present. "And there have been many times when we've collectively asked ourselves whether capitalism is the right way to go. But, like that turd you just can't flush; it keeps floating back."

Which made George chuckle.

2.7: Capitalist Growing Pains – 1800 – 1900

"But capitalism hasn't had the smooth ride you might expect from such a supposedly superior system," qualified the Director. "It certainly doesn't live up to the brochure we're given at school. For example, there have been many times when the weaknesses of the capitalist system have been exposed, usually due to greed getting the better of the bankers and financiers, and each time it happens, the whole rotten scam falls apart. And, just as predictably, it's ordinary working folk who end up picking up the tab. I'm not exaggerating, George. Look it up if you don't believe me."

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[29] **www.richardmille.com**

"I believe you!" replied George defensively, still secretly unsure whether to believe this grumpy senior citizen.
"And each time it happens, there's a lot of hand-wringing and talk of reform, yet those sneaky little dragons always manage to persuade us to trust them again, and the whole sorry cycle starts all over."
"You have to admit, it sounds ridiculous," George said softly. "Are you sure this is really happening? I mean, aren't we smarter than this? Don't we learn from our mistakes?"
"That's a charming idea," replied the Director, smiling ironically. "And a reasonable question, too, but you'd be laughed at if you asked such a thing in professional circles. In my experience, when I chat with the 'money men'—and I use those words lightly—I've found that the rules we play by in everyday life don't seem to apply to them. I have a little theory about that, but before I dive into it, let me share some evidence that supports my thoughts."
"Sure, fill your boots," invited George - a phrase he'd heard his British friends use, though he had no idea what it meant.
So the Director began again. "Before I start — and in the spirit of full disclosure — plenty of financial crashes brought chaos to society before Adam Smith appeared on the scene. There was *Tulip Mania* [30] in 1636 and the *South*

[30] **Tulip Mania** was one of the first recorded instances of a financial bubble occurring in the Netherlands between 1636 — 1637. At this time tulips were a symbol of wealth and status, tempting many to import and grow bulbs from Turkey which, in turn, caused a frenzy amongst speculators hoping to profit from skyrocketing prices. In 1637 the bubble burst, causing bankruptcy amongst many investors and damaging the Dutch economy. **Tulipomania: The Story of the World's Most Coveted Flower & the Extraordinary Passions It Aroused by Mike Dash**

Sea Bubble [31] in 1720, both caused by mass hysteria when people feared they might miss out on making some easy money. So, admittedly, Adam Smith and his theories weren't the sole cause of financial crashes, but since then, capitalists have certainly made up for lost time.

"For instance, the first major crash of the American capitalist system was the *Panic of 1819*[32], triggered by a collapse in land prices. It happened again two decades later with the *Panic of 1837* [33], again caused by rampant speculation on land and railway shares, fuelled by the *Great Westward Expansion.*

"And who could forget the *Panics of 1857* [34] and *1873* [35], both triggered by bubbles in the American real estate market, the latter of which kicked off *The Long Depression* and two decades of crippling unemployment across America.

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[31] **The South Sea Bubble** occurred in Britain during the early 18th century. The South Sea Company was granted a monopoly to trade with Spanish colonies in South America causing the company's stock to soar to unprecedented levels. However, many of the company's trading ventures failed to make a profit and, in 1720, the bubble burst leading to financial ruin for many investors and leading to a loss of confidence in the stock market. The government's involvement in the South Sea Company and its failure to regulate speculation caused a political scandals and public outrage. **The South Sea bubble by John Carswell**

[32] The **Panic of 1819** was the first widespread financial crisis in the United States and was followed by a general collapse of the American economy that persisted through 1821. **https://en.wikipedia.org**

[33] The **Panic of 1837** began a major depression which lasted until the mid—1840s. **https://en.wikipedia.org**

[34] The **Panic of 1857** caused by America's declining international economy and over—expansion of the domestic economy was the first financial crisis to spread rapidly throughout the United States thanks to the invention of the telegraph. **https://economic—historian.com**

[35] The **Panic of 1873** was a financial crisis that triggered an economic depression in Europe and North America that lasted from 1873 to 1877 or 1879 in France and in Britain. The crisis was triggered by financial failures in Vienna, the capital of Austria—Hungary. The panic also lead to tensions between the North and South in the years leading up to the American Civil War. **https://www.britannica.com**

And finally, to tie up the loose ends of the 19th century, let's give a big hand to the *Panic of 1893* [36]."

"Whoo Hoo!" cheered George in mock celebration.

"Notice anything, George?" asked the Director.

"A lot of people being hysterical and panicking?" Replied George ruefully.

"You're absolutely right!" agreed the Director. "Those *Masters of the Universe* are ever so macho when they're raking in profits from their investments, but at the slightest hint of a run, they hit the panic button and soil themselves, leaving the rest of us to clean up the mess. The most recent big crash in 2008 resulted in fifteen years of *austerity* during which essential public services were slashed to repay the debts created by those candy-ass bankers. And not one of those motherfuckers carried the can. They never do. “They're like compulsive gamblers—always doubling down on riskier and riskier bets, pushing their luck until it all finally blows up. And when it does, they dust themselves off and start scheming again. No remote, no ‘sorry’, just back to spinning grand new promises of wealth if only we’d trust them with our money, one more time. And somehow, we do. Again and again, and again. You see, capitalism’s a movable feast—these charlatans will change the rules, or invent new ones, whenever it suits them. Whenever they see a chance to make money. But if they really were as brilliant as they’d have us believe, they’d surely stop panicking so much and figure out how to prevent financial crashes in the first place.”

“Maybe they need therapy,” George said. “*A 12-step program* perhaps?” he added with a smirk.

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[36] The **Panic of 1893** began with the collapse of the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad, leading to a wave of bank failures which set off a downward spiral of business closures, unemployment, and deflation. **https://worldhistory.us**

"You might just be right," agreed the Director, smiling. "It's a glitch in the system, and it certainly isn't going away. I mean, during the *'Panic of 1873*,' the French diplomat *de Tocqueville* [37] happened to be touring America and made a few telling observations."

Suddenly, in a moment of mock drama, the Director stopped in his tracks, grabbed George by the arm, looked up to the stars, and proclaimed in a melodramatic French accent:

"Their desire for wealth is universal, ceaseless, and eternal. There are always individuals whose aspirations outstrip their possessions, willing to relinquish the serenity of ownership in pursuit of the pleasures of acquisition."

"Even in 1832, de Tocqueville could see something was deeply wrong with a society built on status, power & money.

"And after the crash of '73, Mark Twain wrote *The Gilded Age* [38], which satirised the corrupt politicians who accepted money from the industrialists and the extravagant and tasteless lifestyles of America's *nouveau riche*[39]. Thanks to Twain, that whole period became known as *The Gilded Age* because a society that seemed to be made of gold was, in fact, just a facade."

"Perhaps if he'd written it today, he'd have called it *The Polished Turd*?" offered George in all seriousness.

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[37] In 1831 **Alexis de Tocqueville** (1805–1859) traveled to the United States to study the American penal system. During his nine-month tour, he conducted extensive interviews on the social, political, and cultural conditions of the young American republic which formed the basis of his book "Democracy in America". He also examined the role of religion, the importance of civil associations, and the influence of equality on social relations. **Alexis de Tocqueville: A Life by Hugh Brogan**

[38] Originally released in 1873, **The Gilded Age** is a sharp satire and revealing insight into post-Civil War American society. The story takes place in an era where corrupt and unscrupulous land speculators, financiers and politicians shamelessly exploit the nation's post—war optimism. The book very quickly became synonymous with excessive materialism, and corruption in public life. **THE GILDED AGE A Tale of Today By Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner 1873**

[39] **Nouveau Riche**: One who has recently become rich, especially one who flaunts newly acquired wealth and who is therefore perceived to lack the refinement or gained social acceptance of others in that class.

"Maybe so," conceded the Director, chuckling at George's ability to see through the superficial and get to the heart of the issue. "And the fact that capitalism is built on selfishness and greed sets a terrible precedent for how we treat each other as a society, how it taints not just our day-to-day lives but our futures too. "

"How so?" asked George. "Are capitalists time travellers now?"

"Well, yes, in a sense, they are," admitted the Director, intrigued by this thought. "In our film, the capitalist dragon isn't content with the modest feast it can enjoy today; after all, even a dragon has limits to how much it can scoff at one sitting. But think about how much more it can gorge on if it hoards meals for the next century! That's where the real treasure lies. What really gets a dragon drooling is the chance of stockpiling more and more food for tomorrow, the day after, *ad infinitum*."

"That's disgusting," Said George, feeling nauseous as he pictured that bloated and obese monster. "That's the definition of greed," he added.

"You're right; it IS disgusting," granted the Director, adding, *"Just one more wafer-thin mint!"* in a ridiculous French accent.

"de Tocqueville?" Asked George, a little confused.

"*Mr. Creosote,*"[40] corrected the Director, immediately wishing he hadn't and swiftly moving on. "And this insatiable need to hoard as much as they can, be it food or gold or

[40] **Mr. Creosote** is a fictional character who appears in **Monty Python's *The Meaning of Life***. He is a monstrously obese and vulgar restaurant patron who is served a vast amount of food and alcohol whilst vomiting repeatedly. After being persuaded to eat an after-dinner mint — "It's only wafer—thin" — he graphically explodes. **https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mr_Creosote**

shares in a profitable company, is what's destroying society. They call it *Speculation."* [41]

"Well, *you've got to speculate to accumulate,"* chimed George, recalling something his dad used to say. "But judging from what it's done to the planet, make that *when you speculate, you devastate."*

"And considering how investment bankers tend to panic whenever the market tanks and throw themselves from 15-storey windows, you could say *they speculate 'til they defenestrate.* Ho ho."

The Director glanced at George, hoping for a minor chuckle at his subtle quip, but judging from George's blank expression, he realised the joke had gone over his head at a considerable altitude.

After a moment of awkward silence, the Director shrugged his shoulders. "Whatever… Anyway, speculation is surely a terrible way to run a society. The clue is in the name: 'Speculation' means *'Reasoning based on inconclusive evidence; conjecture or supposition.'* It's just a fancy name for gambling, and it's the cause of every single financial crash we've ever suffered, from the *South Sea Bubble* and *Tulip Fever* to the *Subprime Crash* of 2008 [42]. So the bankers insist that what they do is some intricate science far beyond the grasp of us mere mortals, and they need to keep this illusion alive because if we ever catch on that they're nothing more than glorified gamblers, we might start asking some awkward questions. And if that happens, then the entire capitalist house of cards might come crashing down."

"Sounds like a bad weekend in Vegas," reflected George.

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[41] **Financial speculation: the good, the bad and the parasitic** by Lawrence Mitchell "it's probably fair to say that pretty much every financial crisis since the tulip mania of the 1630s can be attributed to some sort of mass speculation." **https://theconversation.com**

[42] **The Subprime Mortgage Crisis** 2007–2010 stemmed from an earlier expansion of mortgage credit, including to borrowers who previously would have had difficulty getting mortgages. **https://www.federalreservehistory.org**

"Except they're gambling with *our* money, and when they lose their shirts and are kicked out of the casino, it's us ordinary folk who have to bail them out. And given how much they're paid, the fancy cars they drive, the big houses they live in, and the sense of entitled superiority they radiate, you'd think they'd be pretty good at what they do, wouldn't you?"

"You'd think," agreed George, shrugging while preparing to be contradicted.

"Yep, well, you'd be wrong because, in 2013, the *Observer* newspaper conducted an experiment that confirmed what a lot of us already suspected: that, despite all the hype, these *Masters of the Universe* are no better at speculating than the rest of us."

"How so?" asked George, intrigued.

"Well, the newspaper challenged a team of top stockbrokers to pick £5,000 worth of any stocks they believed would yield a good return on their investments [43]. Meanwhile, a cat called Orlando picked stocks by throwing a toy mouse at a list of *FTSE 100* companies. After three months, each 'team' swapped out any stock that wasn't performing, and, at the end of the year, the profits for each 'team' were calculated, and it turns out Orlando outperformed the stockbrokers by 4.2%."

"*Top Cat* beats the top dogs!" cheered George.

"You're absolutely right, George, and it wasn't a one-off. In similar experiments, a chimp named Raven outperformed over 6,000 professional money managers, while a Russian circus chimpanzee called Lusha beat 94% of Russia's mutual funds. There was also a ring-tailed lemur who picked stocks for the Chicago Sun-Times by circling his choices in the newspaper with a red pen—and he managed to outperform the market indexes for three years running. Things got so bizarre that Cass Business School decided to

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[43] 13 Jan 2013 — **Investments**: Orlando is the cat's whiskers of stock picking moggy beats the professionals and a team of students in the Observer's share portfolio challenge. **www.theguardian.com**

replicate the concept on a massive scale to see if it was true, so they simulated 10 million random "monkey" portfolios for 43 years, and when they finally pulled the plug, the monkeys outperformed the market 60% of the time." [44]
"That's crazy!" laughed George, amused and baffled in equal measure.
"After analysing what was happening, the scientists concluded that humans simply aren't able to behave rationally when things start to go wrong, and they panic and bail out on investments before things get even worse."
"But if you're a cat or a monkey, you just don't give a shit," observed George.
"Exactly," agreed the Director, "and yet we're still expected to regard these bankers and city traders as a sort of higher life form capable of magic when, in reality, they're simply the ones prepared to take risks with other people's money. It's absurd!"

2.8: The New Deal, Bretton Woods & Attlee's Welfare State

George and the Director were now walking past the windows of the lovely old pubs near Hammersmith Bridge. George glanced inside to see a welcoming bar full of cheerful drinkers, and he wondered whether he could persuade the Director to drop in for a last pint themselves. His feet were sore, and so was his head, and for a moment, he thought about suggesting they postpone this critique of capitalism until the next time he was in town.
But as he looked at the Director and his burning need to explain his ideas, George realised the least he could do was to listen. After all, wasn't this the same issue the Director had warned him about — the temptation to succumb to apathy and hubris? Could something as urgent as a climate disaster be put

[44] **Dartboard Investments: Contests, Monkeys and Random Stock Picks**
www.themcgriffalliance.com

off? And in any case, the Director was clearly in no mood to stop, so even proposing such a thing seemed pointless.

Unaware that his audience might be having second thoughts about his extended walk-and-talk session, the Director pressed on: "So let's move on to the 20th century, George, where things really start to heat up," he said enthusiastically. "I can't wait to tell you about the *Wall Street Crash* and the *Great Depression*!"

Momentarily forlorn, George consoled himself with the idea that matters seemed to be nearing an era he could connect with, and at least the gentlemen now under discussion were no longer wearing powdered wigs.

"So what's this Wall Street Crash all about?" asked George, hoping it might involve NASCAR or Formula One.

"You must have heard of it!?" the Director exclaimed, surprised by how little young people seemed to know about what was, to him, still recent history.

"I'm afraid not," replied George. "I mean, I've heard of it because people sometimes mention it on TV, but I can't say I've spent much time wondering what it was."

The Director again felt a twinge of dismay as he wondered whether the incurious nature he'd observed in his younger cast members might ultimately be their downfall. Perhaps they were now so inured by video games, *TikTok* and celebrity gossip that they could no longer see how much their lives were in danger. Would this wilful blindness be their undoing? *Ignorance is bliss* and all that. How can you sound the alarm if you no longer see the danger? Again, the Director felt pity rather than anger, and, in a way, he felt guilt too, knowing that, through his advertising career, he'd helped infantilise this audience, encouraging them to buy stuff they didn't need in order to hit his targets and keep the wheels of the economy turning.

"OK," said the Director, recognising he'd need to provide more background on the Wall Street Crash and the ensuing Great Depression, "given all the

economic disasters of the 19th century, you'd have thought we might have started to ask awkward questions about the free market and its ability to create a stable and equitable society where everyone thrives. "You'd think," offered George with an exaggerated shrug that indicated he wasn't optimistic.

"You would," agreed the Director, "but you'd be wrong because, in 1927, the wheels of the economy came off like a Monster Truck destruction derby!"

"More like a Wall Street *Car* Crash, then?" asked George.

"Exactly," replied the Director, "you see, after the horrors of the First World War, all the wealthy industrialists and middle-class investors were having a fine old time, drinking bootleg hooch, listening to jazz, and dancing the Charleston. They were *demob* happy, convinced that the worst was behind them, and they wanted to make money. So they cheerfully took out loans to buy overpriced shares on the stock market… Big mistake."

"The Great Gatsby, right?" asked George. "DiCaprio beat me to that part, too."

"Yes, well, be that as it may, just like Gatsby, all those greedy investors took an early bath on *Black Thursday* [45] in 1929 when the Dow Jones lost a quarter of its value, wiping billions from the American economy in a single day. By 1932, the US stock market had lost 90% of its value, which kicked off the *Great Depression*." [46]

"I was in a great depression myself when I didn't get that Gatsby part," reflected George, still feeling slighted.

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[45] **Black Thursday**, October 24, 1929, marked the beginning of the devastating stock market crash of 1929, with panic selling of 12.9 million shares on the New York Stock Exchange, leading to a sharp decline in stock prices and widespread investor panic. **www.investopedia.com**

[46] **The Great Depression** was triggered by the Wall Street Crash of 1929, which led to widespread stock market and bank failures, a collapse in consumer spending, high unemployment, widespread poverty, deflation, and reduction in industrial production. Many governments implemented austerity measures that only made things worse and had far—reaching social and political consequences, including the rise of authoritarian regimes such as Nazi Germany.
www.novelinvestor.com ***The Great Depression: A Diary by Benjamin Roth***

"Yes, but your depression didn't last ten years and wasn't the most catastrophic economic event of the 20th Century, was it?" challenged the Director.
"Felt like it at the time," replied George sullenly.
"Oh, stop whining!" retorted the Director, half in jest, half seriously. "During the Great Depression, a quarter of US adults were unemployed. Thousands lost their homes, and thousands more tenant farmers migrated from the mid-west dustbowls to California looking for work. Ever see *The Grapes of Wrath*?" [47]
George suddenly remembered the high school production of the book he'd appeared in and stopped feeling sorry for himself. He also forgot all about his *bête noire*, DiCaprio. Instead, he fell back into listening mode and invited the Director to proceed.
"By 1933, homelessness and hunger were so rampant across the States that a whole underclass of desperate people started organising protests and going on strike. On top of that, socialism and communism were beginning to gain traction among the working classes, and this was seen as a threat to the capitalist model on which America was built.
"The fallout from the Great Depression was so dreadful that President Roosevelt felt he had no choice but to implement the most drastic social programme in America's 150-year history, which he called the *New Deal."*
"I think I remember this from school," offered George uncertainly but happy to hear about something he was vaguely familiar with.
"It was the equivalent of an economic defibrillator to the heart of US society, stimulating growth by building a vast network of roads, bridges, social housing, and lots of cultural projects that employed artists. It also promoted nature and expanded the national parks."

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[47] **"The Grapes of Wrath"** is a 1940 American drama film directed by John Ford, based on John Steinbeck's Pulitzer Prize—winning novel of the same name. The film follows the family of Oklahoma farmers who lose everything during the Great Depression and migrate to California in search of a better life. It is considered a classic of American cinema. **www.britannica.com**

"Sounds great," said George approvingly.
"But it also did a lot of socialist things that some Americans thought was a bit too communism for their liking."
"Oh yeah, like what?" asked George, intrigued.
"Things like old-age pensions, welfare benefits and unemployment payments. Predictably, the commie-hating Republican Party hated it, and their financial backers complained that the *New Deal* went too far in expanding government power, even comparing it to Soviet-style economic planning and, surprise, surprise, it also stopped them making money."
"*Quelle surprise*," muttered George drolly.
"In fact, it created much of what America is today and put the country on a much stronger footing in the run-up to the *Second World War*."
"Well done, Franklin Delano Roosevelt!" said George appreciatively.
"Yes, you could even say the *New Deal* helped beat the Nazis because the US economy was, by then, in such good shape it was able to pour vast resources into the war effort. By 1944, Germany was on the verge of defeat, and with the world now a smoking ruin, it was clear that capitalism wouldn't be able to get the global economy back on its feet."
"How so?" asked George.
"Because, for capitalism to work, you need buyers and sellers, but when all the buyers are either dead or destitute, there's no one around to buy what you have to sell."
"Funny how there's never a fat greedy dragon around when you need one," quipped George.

The Director chuckled at this before continuing: "So Roosevelt and Churchill sent their chief economists to *Bretton Woods* [48] in New Hampshire, charged with devising a new monetary system that would jolt the world back to life."
"No pressure then." noted the American.
"You're right, George. Come to think of it, that *was* an incredible task to be set, but, fortunately, the 730 delegates from 44 allied nations, led by John Maynard Keynes for Britain and Harry Dexter White for the US, put together a package of measures that got the world off life-support and back on track enjoying several decades of improved living standards and relative peace."
"So, what did they do?" asked George, genuinely curious.
"Well, Keynes and White designed and set up the *International Monetary Fund* (*IMF*) and the *International Bank for Reconstruction*, which later became the *World Bank*, and most importantly, they tied international currencies to the US Dollar, which created financial stability and promoted cooperation between countries… naturally, the *free-market dragons* hated it."
"Naturally," agreed George, unimpressed. "So where did it go wrong?"
"I'll explain all of that in a minute, but first, let me give you one last example of governments trying to contain the excesses of capitalism if that's OK

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[48] **The Bretton Woods Conference**, of July 1944 brought together 44 Allied nations to establish a new framework for international monetary and financial cooperation. The Bretton Woods Agreement established a system of fixed exchange rates, with currencies pegged to the US dollar, which was in turn pegged to gold at a fixed rate. This system, known as the Bretton Woods system, aimed to promote international trade, economic stability, and reconstruction in the aftermath of World War II. **https://www.economist.com** ***The 70—year itch: Despite some flaws, the Bretton Woods agreement helped usher in a long and relatively peaceful period of economic growth.***

because it's important to mention here Attlee's Post-War *Welfare State*." [49]
"Cool beans," replied George, which the Director assumed was an approval.
"Ever heard of the *Welfare State*, George?" The Director wasn't optimistic.
"I can't say as I have," replied George again. History was never my thing."
"Well, if you haven't heard of Atlee's *Welfare State,* perhaps you've heard of the *National Health Service,* you know, the *NHS?*" The Director wasn't holding his breath on this either, doubting any of it would ring bells for George.
"Yes, now that I have!" replied George, hoping it was what he thought it was.
"Back in the States, the Republicans are obsessed with it. Apparently, the service the NHS offers is terrible and a total waste of money."
"That's the one!" replied the Director, chuckling. "They hate it over there. They think it's a communist plot to undercut *Big Pharma*."
"Something like that, I guess…" confirmed George.
"Well, don't be fooled, George. The NHS is a beautiful thing—free healthcare for everyone. The major healthcare providers in the States have been trying to undermine it and privatise it ever since. Fortunately, we Brits kicked Churchill and his Tory chums out of government at the end of the war and elected a socialist party instead. This allowed Clement Attlee to apply his undiluted socialist ideas that John Maynard Keynes had proposed at Bretton Woods a couple of years earlier. What followed was six years of massive government intervention, resulting in a welfare state and the nationalisation of industries such as coal, steel, and railways. All paid for through taxing the rich.
"And, like Roosevelt's *New Deal*, Attlee's policies were successful, and just like the American *New Deal*, the bankers and moneymen hated it. I mean, how

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[49] Between 1945 and 1951, the Labour Government passed a series of measures which became known as the **'Welfare State'.** This refers to the fact that the Government took responsibility for looking after the well—being of all its citizens. The reforms made were designed to take care of the British people 'from the cradle to the grave' (i.e. from birth to death). A number of reforms and changes were introduced in an attempt to tackle the 'Five Giants' — disease, want, squalor, ignorance and idleness. **www.bbc.co.uk**

can any self-respecting dragon be expected to make money if all the important industries providing public services to a civilised society are publicly owned?"
"Beats me," confirmed George. "It all sounds too good to be true. I wasn't much interested in history at school, but I'm pretty sure this wasn't the version I was taught."
"You're right, George, and there's a reason for that, and it's called *hegemony*, but I'll come to that in a minute."
George's heart sank again as he wondered if this lecture would ever end.
"So, do you imagine these successful government interventions had finally tamed capitalism?" asked the Director, unaware that George had tuned out of the conversation and he was now more or less talking to himself. "After all, by eliminating the opportunity to speculate and create debts, the world was more stable, and the chances of a global recession were significantly reduced."
"You'd think so," agreed George, not entirely sure what he was being asked.
"Well, not so fast!" cautioned the Director.
"OK," agreed George, trying not to look confused.

2.9. The Dragon Unchained

"So, the world emerged from two world wars a safer place thanks to some enlightened thinking," continued the Director, "what could possibly go wrong?"
"I'm not sure," replied George, "but I've a feeling I'm about to find out."
"You're right, George, and it wasn't good. In fact, what's happened since the 1970s has been absolutely terrible. OK, if I tell you about it?"
"Why not?" replied George, somewhat resigned. "We've come this far. There's no turning back now."

"That's the spirit," joshed the Director, enthusiastically slapping George on the back. "Just a couple more items on my agenda, and we'll have reached your hotel, and we can get something to eat."

George found this a very comforting thought.

"So," began the Director again, preparing for a lengthy discourse. "Thanks to *Bretton Woods*, things went pretty well for America after the war. The dollar was now the world's currency, and America was the most prosperous country on the planet."

"Hoorah!" said George in mock celebration, sensing a 'but' coming…

"But — this wasn't enough for President Richard Nixon, who, under the Bretton Woods Agreement, was required to keep enough gold piled up in Fort Knox to back every paper dollar in circulation, which he found a very tiresome rule, given he had a war with Vietnam to fund and a nuclear arms race with Russia to win.

"Boo!" said George in mock defeat.

"So, desperate for money, Nixon simply disregarded the Bretton Woods rules, which had been working so well, and went on a spending spree he knew he'd never be able to repay. As a result, he unleashed all the same old financial excesses that had led to the Great Depression and all the financial crashes that went before it.

"Wanker!" exclaimed George with delight, a British word he'd learned over the previous six months and relished saying whenever he got the chance.

"Indeed," agreed the Director. "This whole sorry episode became known as *The Nixon Shock* [50], with *Tricky Dicky* now spending as much as his little imperialist heart desired without anyone telling him he couldn't. However, a

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[50] **The Nixon Shock** refers to a series of economic policies announced by President Richard Nixon on August 15, 1971 that effectively ended the Bretton Woods system of fixed exchange rates. The Nixon Shock had far—reaching consequences for the global economy, leading to volatile exchange rates, inflation, international relations and a shift in US economic policy, with a greater emphasis on domestic priorities. **https://history.state.gov**

side effect of this was that the global currency markets were once again set adrift, opening the door to the same speculators who'd fucked things up in the first place. We're talking about free trade, floating exchange rates, and unregulated debt. The lot."

"*Wanker!*" reiterated George, although, this time, with a little less enthusiasm.

"And just like *The Great Panic*, the *Long Depression* and the *Wall Street Crash*, it didn't take long for the deregulated markets to spin out of control."

"Why did we let him do it? Wasn't it obvious this would happen?" asked George, who was having trouble understanding how his government, which, until this conversation with this odd little Scotsman, he'd assumed was a competent and reliable body of men who had his best interests at heart.

"The issue, George, is that Nixon had been urged to open the gates to the speculators by a group of right-wing thinkers known as *The Chicago School,* led by an economist named Milton Friedman [51]. Friedman and his associates viewed Bretton Woods as a barrier to US global dominance, particularly as they'd developed their own economic theory called supply-side, *trickle-down* economics, which, on closer examination, was just a glorified rehash of Adam Smith's *Invisible Hand."*

"Friedman argued the best way to create wealth was to allow speculators to do whatever they wanted and that the rest would take care of itself. Yet, just like Adam Smith's *Invisible Hand*, it's pretty obvious that, unless there's some regulation forcing these greedy bastards to be more socially-minded, they'll always find ways to keep their money up at the top where they hang out and

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[51] [51] **The Chicago School** represents a prominent group of economists associated with the University of Chicago, originally led by influential figures such as Milton Friedman and George Stigler. They advocate free-market, laissez-faire economic policies, the importance of individual choice, competitive markets, and limited government intervention. As such, in the 1970'a they challenged prevailing Keynesian ideas and argued that the free-market mechanisms promoted greater economic efficiency and prosperity. The Chicago School continues to shape economic thought, academic research and public debate on economic issues. ***The Chicago School: How the University of Chicago Assembled the Thinkers Who Revolutionised Economics and Business By Johan Van Overtveldt*** https://www.goodreads.com

allow remarkably little to 'trickle down' to the little people on the breadline living underneath. It isn't rocket science."

"I've seen this movie before," noted George drily.

"You're right," agreed the Director. "I put it all down to the stupidity of naive right-wing economists who, just like Adam Smith, constantly underestimate just how greedy people can be, given half a chance."

"Amen to that," agreed George.

"Free-market economists love to run their cost-benefit analysis spreadsheets over their various economic theories," continued the Director, nodding, "and when they do it, they make sure to include things like innovation, investment, efficiency, and maybe even higher living standards and life expectancy in the 'benefit' column. But, when it comes to finding things to put in the 'cost' column, they downplay or completely miss inconvenient factors such as *inequality, pollution* and *catastrophic environmental disasters*. And I don't care how they try to spin it, but increased life expectancy isn't much of a benefit IF THE PLANET KILLS US FIRST! So thanks a lot, Milton Frikkin' Friedman; you can take your free-market, laissez-faire, trickle-down economics and stick it where the sun don't shine."

Coming from California, George couldn't grasp this expression, given that, in *Tinsel Town*, the sun more or less shone everywhere all the time.

"By the 1980s, Reagan [52] and Thatcher [53] had jumped on the Friedman bandwagon and were rabidly tearing up regulations, left, right and centre; deregulating the banks and the stock market, abolishing fixed commission charges, privatising industries, dismantling social safety nets and generally trashing anything that looked like *The New Deal* or the *Welfare State*.

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[52] **Ronald Wilson Reagan** (February 6, 1911 – June 5, 2004) American politician, actor and 40th **president of the United States** from 1981 to 1989. **www.history.com**

[53] **Margaret Hilda Thatcher** (13 October 1925 – 8 April 2013) British **Conservative** politician who was **Prime Minister of the United Kingdom** from 1979 to 1990. **www.biography.com**

[54] "The Thatcher government was so pleased with itself that it even named its economic vandalism: *The Big Bang*. And, in doing so, it blew the bloody doors off Britain's financial institutions and then invited a horde of short-term profiteers to come in and ransack the place.

"I suspect Margaret didn't give much thought to any of this, given she was so ideologically driven by the false promises of the Chicago School. Yet, arguably, her most consequential decision—leading to our present and ongoing crisis—was allowing electronic trading in the City of London. In 1980, computers were still a novelty, and the profound way they would change financial transactions was not yet fully understood. So, while harnessing their speed and efficiency seemed logical, it was not unreasonable to suspect this would also exponentially amplify the risks."

"Sounds scary," remarked George, pretending to shiver with fear.

"You might be more frightened in a minute when I tell you what happens next," replied the Director tersely. "The Big Bang did indeed encourage growth and lower inflation for a while, but it was only a matter of time before greed crept back into the system, and the gap between the rich and poor quickly grew wider again. Hey—and guess what? In 1987, we had Black Monday; in 1999, we had the Dot-Com Bubble; and, in 2008, we were hit with the mother of all crashes: the Subprime Mortgage Crisis, which brought down the world banking system. Who could have possibly seen that coming?"

"Beats me!" joshed George in mock confusion. "Maybe the same greedy bastards that screwed things up the last time?"

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[54] **The Big Bang** was a series of reforms implemented by the Tory Government on the UK financial markets in 1986. They aimed to deregulate the London Stock Exchange, transforming it from a traditional, restrictive market into an open, competitive, and internationally integrated marketplace. The key changes included the abolition of fixed commission rates, the removal of barriers to entry for foreign firms, the adoption of electronic trading systems, and the relaxing of financial services regulations. The Big Bang revolutionised the structure and operations of the London Stock Exchange, paving the way for increased trading volumes, greater efficiency, and the emergence of London as a global financial centre. ***How the Big Bang changed the City of London for ever.*** **www.bbc.co.uk**

"Got it in one," confirmed the Director, "but what was different this time was the effect this new technology would have on the world of finance. I don't know whether Friedman and his Chicago crew had any idea what would happen if you took the shackles off a dragon on steroids and let it loose on the world stage. I'm guessing they'd have considered it a good thing even if they had known the consequences. And, like so much in their oversimplified, amoral world, they'd have been spectacularly, idiotically wrong."

"Explain," requested George, needing more detail.

"Well, thanks to the internet, Reagan and Thatcher had created the perfect conditions for a whole new level of *free-market* dragon capitalism. A place where capitalist zealots could now buy and sell stocks and shares *instantly*, cutting out the need to deal with a tiresome nexus of *real* people living in the *physical* world. Reagan and Thatcher had inadvertently created a *virtual,* disconnected world where ordinary people became even more like the counters in a game of global *Monopoly*. All of which has ultimately accelerated the climate disaster we've been left to deal with."

"You're right; that does sound scary. Thanks a lot, Maggie," said George.

"Well, buckle up because we aren't finished with this shit yet," added the Director grimly.

3: Kew To Hammersmith – DIRTY WORK

3.1. The Four Horsemen (of the GRiFTer Apocalypse)

"So that's a brief history of capitalism, George, which I hope you found enlightening?"

George offered a somewhat resigned nod of his head in affirmation.

"And I hope you can now see why we need to demystify it, rather than assume it's a fact of life just because that's what we've been told for the past 250 years. And just because it may have worked back then doesn't mean it's the answer to our problems today. The fact capitalism is now killing the planet sure helps focus the mind as we look for an alternative."

"Couldn't agree more," confirmed George. "But that's the past, and as I've asked you several times now, sir…" George now ran a couple of steps in front of the Director and turned to face him. "… WHAT'S THE FRIKKIN' ALTERNATIVE ???"

"It's coming, it's coming," replied the Director, holding up his hands in mock submission. "Just a couple more things to get off my chest before I deal with that. Because I need to bring you bang up to date with just how crazy the whole thing has become."

"It gets worse?" asked George incredulously.

"I'm afraid so," replied the Director. "To be honest, I'm just getting started."

"Shit…" was all George could think to say.

"Since Thatcher and Reagan fired the starting gun on the *Big Bang* and unshackled the beast, all sorts of horrors have unfolded, to the point that the global financial system is now completely out of control. We're looking at a *Frankenstein's monster* rampaging across the countryside, laying waste to everything in its path. And if we want to stop it before it's too late, we need to grab our torches and pitchforks and chase it out of town. I want to assure you that I have some solutions, but I hope you'll allow me a few more minutes to explain the problem before we get to the answers."

George rolled his eyes in disappointment but accepted this logic, knowing his hotel was now a little less than a mile away and that he'd soon be sitting down in a warm room with a plate of food in front of him. "Let's finish this," he said; a cliché he'd uttered in countless low-budget films.

"Great! So here goes," said the Director, setting the scene for the season finale, "Until the 70s, you could more or less set your watch by the financial crisis that would come around like clockwork every few years. There'd be a crash followed by ten years of unemployment, strife, child poverty, starving families, food banks, social decay and the rest of it…and then the Government would bail out the banks — using money taken from the poor in the form of taxes — until the banks could start to speculate again. We'd be back to square one, having the same recurring nightmare. Get the picture?"

"I'm beginning to," replied George.

"And that's precisely what the more astute political observers anticipated once Ronnie and Maggie [1] had got their clammy little hands on the levers of power. They knew that this time, in the late 80s and early 90s, we were about to discover what happens when you give uncontrolled capitalists dragons, already high on their own excesses, access to all-powerful internet technology: Utter chaos ensues."

At this, a distorted grimace came over George's face.

"Back in the day, traders stood on the stock exchange floor waving their arms about, buying and selling stocks to their heart's content, and the only harm they could do was an occasional bankruptcy or, at worst, a crash. But in the 1980s, the computer changed the game entirely. The internet made electronic trading possible, which meant that capitalism was no longer constrained by time or space and, over the next 30 years, it became a self-determining and out-of-control monster which no one understood how it operated anymore, much like that computer *HAL* [2] from *2001: A Space Odyssey.* And now, just like HAL, it's quietly killing us, and we can't switch it off. What's more, it constantly finds new ways to circumvent human attempts to restrain it, and it's only getting worse.

"Take AI, for instance. As it grows more widespread, it threatens jobs traditionally done by humans, which, I assume, you'd think is a bad thing. But not so the dragon capitalists, who see it as a fantastic opportunity to slash manufacturing costs. Meanwhile, practical concerns for humanity, such as societal collapse as workers become obsolete, are casually ignored. And the fact this conundrum remains unsolved perfectly illustrates the core flaw of

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[1] **Ronnie And Maggie, Political Soulmates Devoted To Deregulation** **www.thecorner.eu**

[2] **HAL** (Heuristically Programmed Algorithmic Computer) is a sentient artificial general intelligence computer in Arthur C. Clarke's Space Odyssey series that controls the systems of the Discovery One spacecraft and interacts with the ship's astronaut crew. **https://en.wikipedia.org**

capitalism: it's not designed to serve humanity. Rather, humanity has become just another resource to serve capitalism. Something that became very apparent very quickly after the *Big Bang,* creating what I like to describe as *The Four Horsemen Of The GRiFTer Apocalypse:*

- **G** LOBALISED
- **R** ENT-SEEKING
- **F** INANCIALISED
- **T** AX EVADERS

"That's why I call modern capitalists *GRiFTers*, you see?
Global—Rent—Seeking — Financialised — Tax Evaders.
GRiFTers! Get it? Clever, eh? I made that up all on my own," smiled the Director, clearly pleased with himself.
"Very good," replied George. "Catchy… Now, get on with it!"

3.2. Horseman # 1 – Globalised (Winner Takes It All)

"The main thing Ronnie and Maggie failed to anticipate when they unleashed the *Big Bang* was Globalisation [3]. Marshall McLuhan [4] predicted it back in the 70s when he described a *Global Village* connected by electronic technology,

[3] **Globalisation** refers to the increasing interconnectedness and interdependence of economies, cultures, societies, and people around the world. It involves the exchange of goods, services, information, technology, and ideas across national borders, facilitated through advancements in transportation, communication, and technology. Globalisation is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that has profound implications for individuals, societies, and the global economy. ***Globalization: A Very Short Introduction by Manfred B.*** **https://academic.oup.com**

[4] **Marshall McLuhan** (1911–1980) a Canadian philosopher and media theorist best known for coining the phrases **"the medium is the message"** and **"the global village."** **https://marshallmcluhan.com**

which, he warned, would distort reality and create tensions within societies. But who cares about trivialities like that when there's money to be made?

"And sure, there was Globalisation before the *Big Bang* because, I guess, the *East India Company* was the first global corporation. One of its most notorious wheezes was to force Indian farmers to grow opium instead of food and then force the Chinese to exchange this opium for their tea, silk and porcelain. And, when, quite reasonably, the Chinese government said they didn't want tons of cheap opium flooding the market, causing widespread addiction, the *East India Company* started the *Opium Wars* [5] and essentially took over China! After that, they extracted taxes from the Chinese and, in return, gave them smallpox, measles and typhus![6] So yes, there was a sort of global corporation back then, but its modern successors carry on the tradition with relish."

"Nasty," replied George, shaking his head in disgust.

"So Globalisation wasn't exactly new, but the scale of what's happened since the *Big Bang* has expanded the power of multinationals beyond anything previously imaginable.

"It's no exaggeration to say that multinationals now run the world's economy with little or no attachment to any one country. They are effectively above the law, and there's little any individual country can do about it. There's no loyalty

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[5] **The Opium Wars** were primarily triggered by the illegal opium trade conducted by British merchants in China. The Chinese government's attempts to suppress this trade led to military confrontations. They marked the beginning of the **"Century of Humiliation"** (1839–1949), a period of foreign domination and internal decline in China. **www.historyextra.com**

[6] There is historical evidence to suggest Europeans, including the British, inadvertently introduced diseases like smallpox, measles, and typhus to indigenous populations in various parts of the world, including China. ***Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900—1900 Alfred W. Crosby*** **https://www.goodreads.com**

or sentimentality when it comes to capitalism. They're called *Multinationals* [7] for a reason: *Profits before Patriotism.*

"We have reached the point where two-thirds of the world's 100 largest economies are global corporations rather than physical countries. *Apple*, for instance, has a market cap of around $3 trillion — about the size of Britain or France's GDP and their sole aim appears to be enriching a tiny elite beyond their already vast wealth, giving little consideration to their employees or the countries where they operate.

However, I've got to mention one exception to this rule: the special group of Chinese multinationals, such as *Alibaba, Tencent, Huawei,* and *PingAn* — a global insurance firm, for chrissakes! — and *BYD*, or *Build Your Dreams:* the world's top-selling electric car maker. All of them are just extensions of the Chinese State, so, in effect, the Chinese government is becoming a multinational in its own right.

"It's as if the entire world is now run by a cartel of *East India Companies*, all operating above the law and, in this respect, very similar to that Dragon in our movie. So I hope you can see that, as I promised earlier, I'm not exaggerating. If anything, they are less our friends and more like enemies with little interest in our existence, beyond our worth to them as customers. We ought to feel concern, disgust and revulsion for how these out-of-control, anti-human organisations have hijacked our futures, and yet, we embrace them as if they were our friends. This is the crazy state of the world we're living in!" The Director seemed to exasperate himself simply by uttering this statement.

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[7] **A Multinational Corporation** is a large company that operates in multiple countries, typically with a centralised management structure. These corporations have subsidiaries, branches, or affiliates in various nations, each contributing to the overall business objectives of the company. They leverage resources, technology, and capital from different regions to expand their reach, access new markets, and maximise profits. MNCs play a significant role in the global economy, influencing trade, investment, and employment patterns worldwide. **www.thebalancemoney.com/**

"It *does* sound crazy," admitted George, "I don't think I've ever considered *The Apple Corporation* as anything other than the good guys." George was now feeling more than a little confused.

"That's right," agreed the Director, pleased George now seemed genuinely engaging with this uncomfortable and challenging idea. "We tend to view these organisations as a benign force for good, but in many respects, they are outright dangerous, and becoming more powerful every day. With all that power should come great responsibility, yet they increasingly behave like callous bullies, mindlessly running amok. In fact, in many respects, it would be inaccurate to think of them as human at all. Certainly, they are nominally controlled by a CEO and a chairman at any given time."

"Or chairwoman," corrected George.

"Or chairwoman," conceded the Director with a nod. "But these company figureheads come and go; they're just a nominal signature at the bottom of the trading accounts, but fundamentally, they are more like the *useful idiots* [8] charged with fulfilling their only duty at the end of each financial year, which is to increase the value of the business."

"Are you sure?" asked George, finding it difficult to determine whether this was true, given how little he understood corporate finance.

"I'm afraid so," replied the Director, clearly deriving no pleasure from delivering this news. "It's dangerous to consider multinational corporations as entities built on human needs. That's simply not true. They exist outside the subjective world of human interaction, to the point that they are now, more or less autonomous, with little interest in us beyond our value as customers."

"Really?" asked George, still unwilling to fully buy this narrative.

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[8] **"Useful Idiots"** refer to individuals who unwittingly support an ideology without fully understanding its flaws. George Bernard Shaw and H.G. Wells were considered Useful Idiots by some because of their sympathetic views toward the Soviet Union under Lenin and Stalin. **https://wordhistories.net**

The Director could see George still needed proof, so he fumbled through his memory banks to see if he could recall any of the hundreds of articles he'd read in *The Economist, Financial Times,* or *Wall Street Journal,* for examples of corporate malfeasance.

"OK," he said, relieved to have recalled one such event from relatively recent history. "Here's an example of what I'm talking about. Do you know the Unilever Corporation? [9] They make *Axe* deodorant, *Dove* soap and *Hellmann's Mayonnaise*?"

"Sure," replied George. "I'd like to credit a can of *Axe Africa* for getting me my first 'shag'; as you guys say over here."

"Excellent!" exclaimed the Director, a little surprised and relieved. 'Well, around 2010, Unilever's CEO Paul Polman thought he'd capitalise on an ad campaign for Dove Soap that had featured a lot of ladies in their undies with — shock, horror! — diverse body types. This had been a big hit because it broke with the tradition of cosmetics companies (Unilever included) only using 'perfect' stick-thin models to sell their products, which, not surprisingly, had made women feel inadequate."

George nodded, recalling the campaign.

"Polman takes this as a sign that modern consumers want a more honest relationship with brands and, next thing you know, he's proposing

[9] **Unilever** is a multinational consumer goods company known for a wide range of household and personal care products. Founded in 1929, it's one of the largest companies in the world by revenue. Unilever's portfolio includes well—known brands like Dove, Lipton, Axe, Ben & Jerry's, and Hellmann's. www.unilever.com

the company goes all-in on *ESG*."[10]

"ESG?" asked George, confused. "Sorry, what? Extra Sensory Goop? Isn't that the name of my old friend Gwynny Paltrow's vagina candles?"

"Er, I don't think so," replied the Director, now equally confused. "ESG stands for *Environmental, Social* and *Governance* issues; it was a craze for a while for companies wanting to jump on the 'environment' bandwagon.

"You mean *greenwashing* [11] bandwagon?" asked George.

"Indeed," the Director agreed, "but I seem to be straying from the point I'm trying to make."

"Apologies." Said George. "Do carry on."

"That's fine, it shows you're paying attention."

"I am," George agreed, even if it wasn't altogether true."

"So when Polman stepped down in 2019," continued the Director, "a Scotsman called Alan Jope took over and went even further in his efforts to make Unilever the greenest corporation on Earth."

"Sounds great," said George, "But is that a 'but' I hear coming?"

"Very perceptive, George," said the Director, chuckling. "You're right because while Jope was busy trying to reduce the company's carbon footprint, source more sustainable raw materials and clean up his supply chain, the Unilever Board didn't think the company's share price was rising fast enough, making the investors jittery. So, next thing you know, it's *bye-bye* Jope, and hello to

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[10] **ESG** provides a set of standards that investors, customers, suppliers, and employees use to evaluate a company's impact on society and the environment, as well as its governance practices and supposedly provides a framework for organisations to demonstrate their commitment to sustainability and responsible business practices. **www.ucem.ac.uk**

[11] **Greenwashing** is a deceptive marketing practice where companies make false or misleading claims about their environmental friendliness. Companies engage in greenwashing to exploit growing consumer demand for sustainable products and improve their public image. **https://plana.earth**

whomever the next, less morally compromised CEO might be that was willing to take his place."[12]

"Pathetic," muttered George, shaking his head.

"Indeed," agreed the Director, "and that, my friend, in a nutshell, is how multinational corporations operate. They have no authentic morals or ethics and are only interested in new ideas that look like they might be profitable. For a while, Unilever thought being 'green' would make them money, but when that didn't work out, they went straight back to *business as usual*. Capitalism has no place for the sentimental or soft-hearted. They're more like soulless zombies than conscious human beings—a sort of money-making machine running on autopilot. Sure, there's a nominal crew sitting *up front*, pretending to steer the ship, happy to take their enormous salaries and bonuses for hitting their short-term targets, but they've little appetite for long-term projects designed to avoid ecological destruction or societal breakdown if they don't also promise a lucrative return on investment."

"I see," said George, now sounding defeated and finally willing to accept the cold-hearted nature of multinationals.

Pleased that he'd made his point, the Director pressed on, wanting to elaborate further. "And the malign motivations of these multinationals are not restricted to making money. They are equally ruthless and cold-hearted when it comes to cutting costs. One of their favourite ruses is called *offshoring* [13], where they outsource labour and production to low-cost markets because it's simply a lot cheaper to make your products there; I think I read somewhere that in 2023,

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[12] **Unilever's new CEO** said the consumer products company's "aspirational" climate commitments have failed to deliver shareholder value and signalled an overhaul of the company's sustainability strategy that will leave more decisions to brand managers. **https://trellis.net**

[13] **Offshoring** is the practice of relocating business operations from one country to another, typically to take advantage of lower costs or favourable business environments. Companies often offshore functions such as manufacturing, customer support, IT services, and other back—office operations. **www.indeed.com**

more than 95% of Apple's key products—including iPhones, AirPods, Macs, and iPads—were produced in China.[14] And they aren't the only ones. Microsoft, Dell, Nike, IBM, Boeing and GE are all up to their necks in it because labour is cheaper in less developed countries, where there are fewer trade unions to complicate matters, and local authorities are more inclined to overlook sweatshops and similar practices. Essentially, it's the ideal setup for multinationals aiming to minimise costs while giving back as little as possible, in the form of taxes, to the communities they exploit and which most need it."

"Charming" muttered George in a desultory tone.

"What's more, it's standard practice for the likes of *Apple, Microsoft, Amazon, Alphabet, Alibaba, BP, Shell, Walmart, Johnson & Johnson* and the rest to bully the heads of G20 economies as if the multinationals were the masters and governments were their servants.

"They achieve this by offering these politicians *carrots* such as campaign donations, 'trade trips', and the promise of establishing a new headquarters in a deprived city. They also do it through *sticks*, threatening to relocate their factories elsewhere if they don't get the concessions they demand. All in exchange for influence over government decision-making, particularly regarding tax policies. The irony is that many governments will even help build these factories, using the income tax extracted from the same people who will end up working there on minimum pay.

"And, while all this is happening, zombie corporations spend as little time as possible considering their social obligations, with few, if any, showing concern for the environment, pollution, deforestation or habitat destruction. All of which are mere inconveniences that obstruct the business of making money. Is it any wonder we have global warming?"

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[14] **Apple's Reliance On China Poses A Problem For The Company www.forbes.com**

"Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck!" said George in exasperation. "What is *wrong* with these people?"

"Well, technically," corrected the Director, "as I've said several times now, they aren't really *people;* they simply aren't human, and we need to stop seeing them that way. They're more akin to a self-driving car hurtling towards a tree, and no one seems willing to switch it to 'manual' and take over the steering. No one wants to be the voice of reason and stop all the fun. It all comes down to a lack of accountability. These behemoths operate above the law and across borders, moving their money and resources around to whatever part of the world suits them best, where they can avoid scrutiny and maximise their returns on investment. And they do it without any consideration for the broader consequences.

"Take the Ukraine War, for instance. When Russian oil supplies were sanctioned, global fuel prices skyrocketed, meaning that the working classes had to allocate a larger proportion of their income to refuelling their cars and heating their homes. The oil giants lamented how dreadful this situation was while, at the same time, miraculously raking in record profits: *Disaster Capitalism* at its finest, my friend."

"Essentially, whenever sanctions are imposed on the ability of these businesses to trade and make money, *back channels* [15] are opened, away from the public gaze, to get around restrictions and keep the exports flowing. For example, when the UK government stopped the export of the components Russian manufacturers needed to fight Putin's *special military operation,* sales fell dramatically. However, when someone looked at where these British businesses were now selling these same components, they noticed the equipment was now flowing into Uzbekistan and Georgia. Turns out, while

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[15] A **back channel** refers to an unofficial or informal means of conducting discussions and negotiations outside of formal channels, allowing for more discreet and flexible interactions between parties.

British taxpayers are donating billions of pounds to Ukraine in the form of aid and weapons, British businesses are happily supplying the Russian army through the back door![16] That's an excellent example of the immorality of capitalism, George. If the price is right, there's always a free-market *Dragon* more than happy to make a killing, even if that means killing the little guys in the middle doing the fighting."

"Wow, that's literally *weapons-grade* capitalist bullshit right there!" exclaimed George, hardly able to believe what he was hearing.

"And there's almost no chance of these sanctions-busters getting caught because the regulators just don't have the resources to close the loopholes," added the Director, "especially given the *revolving door* [17] that allows the best people from the regulatory bodies to be lured over to the *dark side* where their knowledge of government systems ensure the multinationals stay one step ahead of the law and the tax man. If you don't believe me, the last time I looked, the Russian *oligarchs* [18] were still sitting on their yachts in the Med, enjoying their caviar."

"Bastards," muttered George.

"And to stop us from asking too many awkward questions, these same *GRiFTers* employ an army of PR, advertising, and marketing agencies to put a

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[16] **British firms' exports are almost certainly bolstering Russia's war machine** in Ukraine, Sky data analysis finds **https://news.sky.com**

[17] **Power(ful) Connections:** Exploring the Revolving Doors Phenomenon as a Form of State-Corporate Crime **https://link.springer.com**

[18] An **Oligarch** is a member of a small group of wealthy individuals or families who control a disproportionate amount of economic or political power within a society.
Once Upon a Time in Russia: The Rise of the Oligarchs and the Greatest Wealth in History by Ben Mezrich — the true story of the larger—than—life oligarchs who reaped the riches of privatisation after the fall of the Soviet regime. **www.independent.co.uk/arts**
Rich Russians by Elisabeth Schimpfössl review — where does all that money go? — A study, based on interviews, on how oligarchs are reinventing themselves as a cultural elite finds room to skewer their self—aggrandisement and patriotism" **https://www.theguardian.com/books**

friendly face on their household brands and cover up any anti-social behaviour they'd prefer their customers not to see. All this advertising would have us believe these corporations were our *trusted friends, b*ut they aren't our friends at all. In fact, when you think about how they are destroying our planet and lying about it, you'd probably be nearer the truth if you saw them as our enemies."

"Fuck," sighed George.

"I'm afraid so," said the Director, as though he was breaking the bad news to a five-year-old that Santa didn't exist. "They only care about us because they want our money. To them, we're just *consumers*, which is essentially marketing jargon for a unit of consumption. The more *consumers* they attract, the more products they sell and the more profits they make, which, when you track it over a set time, is known as their *profit ratio* [19]. Despite everything they'd like us to believe, this is the only thing they're *really* interested in."

"Isn't this an incredibly cynical way of looking at things, sir?" asked George, saddened by the thought of having been so systematically lied to over the entire course of his life. "I mean, I'm finding it hard to hate *Tony the Tiger* and *Captain Crunch*. I loved those guys when I was growing up."

"I hate to burst your bubble," replied the Director sympathetically, "but that's exactly what's been happening. *Tony the Tiger* and *Captain Crunch* never loved you in the first place; all they ever wanted was your money, and they were willing to say anything allowed within the law to get it. Frankly, you were being groomed by them."

Once again, "fuck," was all George could think of to say in response.

"You see, brands don't have feelings or a conscience; they're just cold, hard assets that generate profits, which, in turn, makes them of interest to investors looking to use the money they have sitting in their off-shore tax havens to

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[19] The **"Profit Ratio" (or Profitability Ratio)** typically refers to a financial metric that measures the profitability of a company relative to its revenue. **https://www.investopedia.com**

make even more money, which then goes back to the tax haven. So investors look at a brand's ability to make a profit and, thus, how much they can sell it for to market speculators. That's all that this is about: that's the cold, emotionless world of the *GRiFTers* for you: *How much can I buy this thing for, and how much profit will I make if I sell it?"*

George shook his head as he listened to this, trying to come to terms with the idea that not only might Santa not exist, but that guy in the red suit who sits in *Macy's Christmas Grotto* might be a psychopath!

"What's more, they don't mind being petty and cynical to their customers if it means making more money," continued the Director relentlessly. "So, they'll sell us products with built-in obsolescence, forcing us to buy new ones every few years. They'll switch the power cords on our phones, so we can't use them with later models. They'll make it impossible to repair or replace broken parts, and if a customer has shown loyalty after being with them for a while, they'll be charged more than the new customers they want to attract. They'll then sell our data to third parties and remove all human contact from their customer service departments, happy to let us waste our time trying to resolve problems with the faulty products we've bought from them. And when we finally get to speak to someone, we lose our temper with the minimum-wage, overworked call handler on the other end of the line, who has no say over how their employer treats its customers and who, if they complain about how the customers are treated, will lose their job. In the world of multinationals, we are all just *cash cows* [20] being milked 'til we're dry or until a legislative body steps in and threatens them with fines for misconduct. Such is the lawlessness of multinational corporations. They owe no loyalty to anyone and will exploit every opportunity, no matter how morally dubious, if a profit can be made."

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[20] **A "Cash Cow"** refers to a product, service, or business unit that generates significant and consistent cash flows for a company with minimal investment or effort. They've generally captured a large share of the market and enjoy strong customer loyalty. **www.investopedia.com**

George was now beginning to feel like he wanted to punch Santa in the face.
"And there's no chance of controlling them because the politicians are neck-deep in this game too, happily backing unregulated international corporations if there's a chance of it benefiting their career. There might even be a string of lucrative chairmanships or non-executive director roles waiting after leaving office—especially if they maintain ties with their successors."
George was now lost for words and had resorted to making a low, growling sound instead.
"Of course, these corporations claim to self-regulate their behaviour to save the planet. They claim that Adam Smith's market forces ensure they don't abuse the system and that their customers are their top priority. And if you believe that, I have some unicorn shit to sell you."
George felt dizzy from all this bleak and depressing information, but he had no information to challenge it, so he fell silent and sad.

3.3 Horseman # 2 – Rent Seeking (Money for Nothing)

"Ready for the second horseman?" asked the Director.
"If I must," replied George, knowing he was now stuck in the equivalent of a verbal 'doom scroll'. Do I have a choice?"
"Well, this one is called the *Rent Seeker* [21], and while it doesn't sound particularly scary, it's probably the one I like the least.

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[21] A **rent seeker** is an individual, organization, or entity that seeks to gain economic benefits through manipulation or exploitation of the political, legal, or economic environment, rather than through productive economic activities like innovation or value creation.
www.wallstreetoasis.com
Rent—Extraction refers to the process of extracting economic rents from a market or economy without contributing significant value in return. **www.youtube.com**
Rent Seeking By David R. Henderson www.econlib.org

"Thinking about it, I *was* scared of the rent-seeking landlady who owned my first apartment in Brooklyn, but I wouldn't say she was exactly a horseman of the apocalypse. Though come to think of it, she did have big teeth."
"Well, in a small way, she falls into this category too, George, because *Rent Seekers* don't contribute anything to society. They cream off a rent every time we use the things they've monopolised."
"Hmm?" said George thoughtfully, still unsure why this was so bad.
"Well, I'm sure you know what it feels like to be on the wrong end of a game of *Monopoly* when your opponent has all the best properties.
"I know that feeling," confirmed George. "It isn't good, and there's nothing you can do about it."
"That's precisely it!" replied the Director. "You wield no power in this situation. The *Rent Seekers* are playing *Monopoly* on a global scale, and each time you land on one of their properties, you have to sell some of your assets just to stay in the game."
The Director considered whether he could find a better analogy. "So, imagine being near a river and having to cross a bridge to get to work."
"OK," agreed George, wondering where this was going.
"Well, imagine if the Mayor of your town decides to sell the bridge to a *Rent Seeker* because he needs money to build a new hospital, and he's been made an offer he can't refuse."
"OK," agreed George again, still unsure where this was going.
"So the Mayor builds the hospital, and the *Rent Seeker* charges a toll every time you use his bridge."
"Ah!" said George. I've seen this movie before. Every time I land on Liverpool Street, I must pay £10 for the privilege."
"Quite so!" said the Director. "And every year, the price for crossing the bridge goes up because the *Rent Seeker* has a monopoly on the bridge and there's no other way to get across."

"I can see how that *is* a problem," agreed George, "but at least we now have a hospital, and the *Rent Seeker* has to maintain the bridge."
"That's true," agreed the Director, "and that's a good point, but the *Rent Seeker* is now making far more profit from the bridge than it costs to maintain it, and before long, he'll use that profit to make the Mayor another offer, and he'll buy the hospital too!"
"Just like in *Monopoly*!" exclaimed George, now understanding the analogy.
"Precisely!" replied the Director, relieved that George had finally got the point. "And the thing to realise is that the *Rent Seeker* only bought the bridge because he'd made his money from charging rent on other assets, and nothing he does adds value to that bridge. He's just finding new ways to extract money from us for using it."
"So, he's basically a parasite?" asked George tentatively.
"Exactly!" agreed the Director. "These parasitic *Rent Extractors* are everywhere, dominating our lives. *Big Tech* has monopolised our online services; financial institutions charge excessive fees for using a bank, *Big Pharma* delays the entry of cheaper generic drugs through patents, while energy and water companies operate as regulated monopolies charging monopoly prices and making excessive profits without competitive pressure, all the while benefiting from government subsidies, tax breaks, and loopholes."
"I guess it's easy when you have friends in high places," mused George.
"Take *Spotify,* for example," continued the Director. "They charge a rent every time you listen to a song on their platform. *Microsoft* takes a rent every time you renew your software subscription. *Facebook* takes a rent...."
"I get the picture," interjected George, feeling happy to have grasped the concept. "The one I hate most is *Ticketmaster*. They don't seem to add anything to make buying a ticket easier. In fact, they charge a 'handling fee' for the pleasure of making the ticket-buying process more complicated."

"Yep, but that doesn't stop the bastards from telling us how grateful we should be for what they claim to be doing for us," added the Director. "I pay a small fortune to Murdoch every month so that I can watch my piddling little *Raith Rovers* football team on a Saturday. And then I not only have to watch their utterly brain-numbing, over-the-top, hyperbolic service but also have to watch their endless, mindless betting adverts. I'm paying him for the privilege of watching adverts! It drives me up the wall!"

This made George laugh sympathetically as he recognised this in his own life.

"Most of the time, *Rent Seekers* are just middlemen, making money off ordinary people who would enjoy their lives perfectly well without them; ordinary people who might otherwise be spending their wages on useful things like clothing and food. The worst thing about the *Rent Seeker* business model is that it's all based on finding ways to make people pay for things they could otherwise get for free, which is why they're so desperate to get their hands on the *NHS*. They'd love the chance to make money from sick people."

"Just like they do in the States," confirmed George, recalling the bills he'd had to pay for simple medical procedures.

"Can you smell something?" asked the Director, changing the subject abruptly.

A little surprised, George sniffed the damp night air. "I can smell the Thames," he said. "It's a little funky, I guess."

"That's right," replied the Director, pleased George had taken his bait. "The river smells like shit because it's choked with sewage. You see, back in 1989, Margaret Thatcher, in her Milton Friedman *trickle-down* frenzy, sold *Thames Water* to private investors [22], and it's now owned by *GRiFTers* from all over the world, including pension funds. You know, I was just talking about the Global Corporations — the outfits that squirrel away their profits in tax

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[22] **In charts: how privatisation drained Thames Water's coffers www.theguardian.com**
England's privatised water: profits over people and planet www.bmj.com
The Standard View: Failing Thames Water has been rinsing us all www.standard.co.uk

havens? None of them have any interest in providing water to the good people of London. Buying *Thames Water* was just an easy way to make money. And now, these investment funds will re-employ the same people who originally worked at Thames Water, only now, they'll pay them a little less, extend their hours, give then less overtime, lay off a few hundred of the ones they think they can do without, and generally invest as little as possible to keep the whole operation just about functioning - while spending a ton of money on PR to convince us of what a great job they're doing. And then, every year, they'll take massive dividends while putting their prices up because they know their customers have no choice but to pay it."

"Leeches!" Shouted George, warming to this parasitic theme.

"By the way, Russia is what you'd call a *rentier state* [23] because all of its assets are now owned by the *rent-seeking kleptocrats* [24] who grabbed whatever they could when the Soviet Union collapsed. The *oligarchs* now rent those assets back to the Russian people and launder the profits they make, mostly through the City of London, I'm ashamed to say."

"And that's how *Rent Seeking* works. It's almost impossible to calculate how big the *Rent-Seeking* economy is, but it's no coincidence that the four largest global companies are *Apple, Microsoft, Alphabet, and Amazon*, all but *Apple* make the majority of their profits from charging rent for the use of their

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[23] **Rentier State** is a term used to describe a country whose economy is heavily dependent on revenues derived from rents or external sources, rather than from productive economic activities such as manufacturing or agriculture. Rentier states often exhibit certain political dynamics, such as authoritarianism, clientelism, or rent—seeking behaviour, that are influenced by the concentration of economic power in the hands of the state. **Rentier Capitalism**
https://en.wikipedia.org

[24] **Kleptocrat** is a term used to describe a ruler, government official, or individual who uses their political power to engage in corrupt practices and systematically steal or embezzle public funds or resources for personal gain.

platforms and *Apple* makes about a quarter of its profits from its services. [25] But here's the thing: They don't take all your money in one go, which would be too obvious. Instead, they go for a slow drip, drip, drip approach, which is less easy to notice and complain about, but, given the chance, they'd suck us dry. Call me old-fashioned, but I was always taught to value things made with love and skill and offered real benefits. *Rent Seeking* makes no attempt to do any of that. Instead, it simply takes advantage of monopolies, creaming off trillions from the limited wages of the working class, mostly out of getting in the way and making a nuisance of themselves. Nothing in this life is certain except death, taxes and online subscriptions."

"Well, just like this river, I think that stinks," observed George drily. "It's like the *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* [26], where everyone's out for my soul. Now that you've pointed out how I'm being quietly bled dry, I can see how insidious it is."

"*Insidious*! That's a perfect way to describe it!" agreed the Director resignedly. "You'd think they'd be ashamed of how they make their money, given they're just glorified pimps. But, of course, they aren't ashamed at all; they're proud of themselves because it has made them unimaginably rich, and they've done it through minimal effort of their own. But this is how a hyper-capitalist *GRiFTer* society works, and that's all that matters."

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[25] In 2024 **Apple's Services** brought in $96.2 billion and saw the fastest growth, with revenue rising 13% year-over-year. This segment includes the App Store, iCloud, Apple Music, and advertising **www.visualcapitalist.com**

[26] **"Invasion of the Body Snatchers"** is a classic science fiction horror film released in 1956, directed by Don Siegel in which alien seed pods land on Earth and replace humans with emotionless duplicates while they sleep. These duplicates are exact physical copies of the original humans but lack any individuality or emotions. It was designed as a critique of Communism **https://en.wikipedia.org**

3.4. Horseman # 3 – Financialisation (Take the Money and Run)

"Pointless middlemen," reflected George, confirming the Director's assessment. "I'm afraid to ask, but what's this *Financialisation* [27] about then?"
"Well, I'm glad you asked after that," smiled the Director in appreciation of this good-natured gesture. "This is a biggie, so strap yourself in."
George mimed the act of putting on a seat belt, making a *clunk-click* sound, and looking ready for action.
"Without wanting to get too technical about this, *Financialisation* is a form of *Rent Seeking.*"
"Really?" asked George, a little surprised. "If it's just more *Rent Seeking*, why do you consider it a separate horseman?"
"A good question, George," replied the Director, slightly surprised by this intelligent query. Perhaps he'd underestimated the American?
"I did think about that when I was writing the screenplay", he explained, "but in reality, all four horsemen are a sort of Russian doll, each fitting inside the other. It's an ecosystem where *GRiFTers* keep us in the dark and exploit us whenever the opportunity arises!"
"God, that sounds dramatic!" exclaimed George. "You're going all *Matrix* on me again!"
"Well, let me explain it, and then you can decide if I'm exaggerating."
"OK, convince me," invited George amiably.
"*Financialisation* describes how the world economy is now dominated by *GRiFTers* looking for ways to make money out of money. Take bankers,

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[27] **Financialisation** refers to the growing influence of financial markets, institutions, and motives in the operation of domestic and international economies. It involves the increasing dominance of financial activities, such as investment, speculation, and financial engineering, over traditional economic activities related to production and consumption.
Financialisation: A Primer **https://www.tni.org**

George; I'm sure you know how they make their money, which is certainly *not* through sitting on a pile of cash and handing out dollar bills whenever you give them a cheque to cash."

I haven't *cashed a check*, as we say in the States, since 2004!" laughed George, "but I know what you mean."

"Well, exactly, but as Alice explained in our film, banks make money out of speculating, which is just another word for gambling. You think a horse will win the Kentucky Derby, so you bet $5 on it, and if it wins, you get $20 back. It's the same for stocks and shares. If you think the war in Ukraine will make oil prices jump, you might buy $5 worth of shares in Tesla. Then, if you're right, and there's a bloody stalemate that causes the price of oil to go up, the stock price of electric cars will also go up, and the $5 of Tesla you own is now worth $100. Congratulations! You've just made $95 out of thin air—you made money out of money. Result: happiness. And that's financialisation."

"But that's just how banks work," observed George. "There's nothing wrong with that. If people couldn't borrow money from a bank, they wouldn't be able to start a business and make their own living. That's how the economy works."

"You're right," agreed the Director. "That's certainly how it worked in the old days, when banks were still interested in bricks and mortar. But now, since the Big Bang, deregulation, and the internet, the entire world economy has become one big supernova explosion of speculation.

"Banks used to make money buying and selling physical things; now they're only interested in making money from financial instruments such as 'options', 'futures', and 'derivatives'. They're less messy and certainly more profitable than buying and selling dirty old factories.

"And it's not just the banks that are interested in speculation. These days, there are investment banks, insurance companies, pension funds, currency traders, hedge funds, private equity firms, global investors, and sovereign wealth funds, all feverishly looking for the next big payday. And don't get me started

on the Global Investment Management Companies such as *BlackRock, Vanguard,* and *Fidelity Investments*. Oh, if only those outfits called themselves Partners—then their collective acronym would be GIMP, which would just about sum up these fabulously rich deviants with an unhealthy fetish for money."

At this, George let out a snort of suppressed delight before asking, "So who are these GIMPS, pray tell?"

"Oh my god, the likes of *BlackRock* [28] manage the investments from pension funds, oligarchs and billionaires who want to make even more money from the enormous amounts of money they already own. To go back to my earlier horse racing analogy, *BlackRock* and their ilk are a sort of incredibly wealthy and privileged *bookmakers* placing bets on behalf of their clients. But, instead of putting $5 on the favourite for the Derby, they gamble with over $ 11 trillion a year, making their living from betting on the system. Rather cosily, they also advise governments about what's happening with the world economy.

"A couple of years ago, the head of *BlackRock*, a guy called Larry Fink, had an attack of the vapours and let it be known that he was now more likely to invest in companies which showed a genuine commitment to reversing climate change. As a result, a whole new industry called *ESG*, which I mentioned before about *Unilever*, sprang up to help multinationals clean up their act. *ESG*, if you remember, stands for *Environmental, Social and Governance*[29]—some hope of that. Rather than see this as an opportunity to help the planet,

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[28] **BlackRock** is one of the world's largest investment management companies, offering a wide range of investment products and services to institutional and individual investors worldwide. Founded in 1988 and headquartered in New York City, BlackRock has grown to become a global leader in asset management, with operations in more than 30 countries and over $10 trillion in assets under management. **www.blackrock.com**

[29] **Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG)** refers to a wide range of environmental, social, and governance issues that are considered relevant to assessing a company's long-term financial performance, risk profile, and societal impact. Companies prioritise ESG issues to help with long-term value creation, reputation management, and stakeholder trust.
An Inconvenient Truth About ESG Investing by Sanjai Bhagat https://hbr.org

these multinationals, with the help of their *ESG* consultants, developed new ways to rig the system, particularly with a loophole called *Carbon Trading* [30]. Eventually, Fink realised it was impossible to tell who was genuinely *green* and who was just *greenwashing* [31]. So he threw in the towel, and everything reverted to stinking capitalist normality. Meanwhile, average global temperatures continued to rise.

"*Carbon Trading* is an excellent example of how the rules and regulations don't apply in the world of high finance. If there's a profit to be made, the *GRiFTers* will find a way to make it by simply creating new rules which justify exploiting it. Take those *subprime* products I mentioned earlier when I described the financial crash of 2008. Subprime products were just a childish way of bundling up *bad debts* and magically turning them into *bankable assets*. This is just one of the hundreds of schemes that fall under the *derivatives* [32] banner, such as *futures, swaps,* and *options*, all of which are too complicated and, frankly, too dull to go into detail about. The critical thing to know about them is that they're just different ways to magic money out of thin air; ironic given that these genius economists and bankers like to present themselves as rational and level-headed, making business decisions based on hard facts and numbers. But don't be fooled. It's just a mirage wrapped in a three-piece suit and red braces. These hard-headed businessmen claim to deal

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[30] **Carbon Trading** provides financial incentives for companies to reduce their emissions through buying and selling emission allowances in a regulated carbon market. They can trade their surplus allowances if they emit less than their allocated limit or purchase additional allowances if they exceed their limit. **How does carbon trading work? www.weforum.org**

[31] **Greenwashing** refers to the practice of misleadingly portraying products, services, or corporate activities as environmentally friendly or sustainable when, in reality, they may not be as environmentally beneficial as claimed. **Explainer: Greenwashing: deception and vague promises that do not help the environment www.reuters.com**

[32] **Derivatives** are financial instruments whose value is derived from the value of an underlying asset, index, or reference rate. These instruments are used for hedging, speculation, and investment purposes, allowing investors to manage risk, gain exposure to different markets, and potentially enhance returns. **Derivatives: A Primer https://treasurytoday.com**

in facts, yet, at the same time, they're happy to entertain ideas like *Quantitative Easing* [33] (which is just a euphemism for printing money) and *Invisible Hands* and *Animal Spirits* [34], none of which would be out of place in a children's fairy story. Yet when their precious capitalism is criticised, and someone suggests a *Circular Economy* [35] or *Degrowth* [36] as a potential alternative, they throw their hands in the air and claim that ideas of this sort are pure fantasy. Well, they can't have it both ways."

"Sounds like the *Mad Hatter's Tea Party!"* said George, perceptively, still plodding along beside him.

"You're so right," agreed the Director, turning his head to look at George. "These days, Wall Street and the City of London are more like scenes from Lewis Carroll than a serious place where rational grown-ups have our best interests at heart."

At this point, George rechecked his *Richard Mille* wristwatch, just like the White Rabbit, hoping the restaurant would still be open when they arrived.

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[33] **Quantitative Easing (QE)** involves buying 'bonds' (known as 'gilts' in the UK) which are a form of 'IOU'. Between 2009 and 2020, the Bank of England bought £895 billion worth of bonds using money it created digitally (from what it called 'central bank reserves') in order to stimulate the economy. This undoubtedly benefitted asset owners and investors more than savers or wage earners. **What is quantitative easing? www.bankofengland.co.uk**

[34] **Animal Spirits** is a term coined by the British economist John Maynard Keynes he used to describe irrational economic decision—making which contribute to fluctuations in economic activity and cause things like financial bubbles. **Animal Spirits: Meaning, Definition in Finance, and Examples www.investopedia.com**

[35] A **Circular Economy** is a systemic approach to economic development designed to benefit businesses, society, and the environment. In contrast to the 'take—make—waste' linear model, a circular economy is regenerative by design and aims to gradually decouple growth from the consumption of finite resources. **www.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org**

[36] **Degrowth** is a political and economic theory that emphasises changing priorities of society from economic growth and production to a society based on sustainability, well—being, concern for the environment and cooperation. The motives for pursuing degrowth include the need to provide environmental sustainability for the long term and improve quality of life. Critics argue degrowth is a luxury of the middle classes and many very poor still need to see economic growth to lift them out of poverty. **www.economicshelp.org**

"*Financialisation* just describes how the *GRiFTers* have got their finger into every little corner of our lives, from the water we drink to the fossil fuels we burn and the personal data they harvest from us. Walk down any high street and look at all those stores and supermarkets. You might think of them as individual businesses, but most are owned by investment companies with about as much interest in high street retail as I have in the Kardashians. They do not care about shoppers or shops *per se*; all they're interested in is their *return on investment* [37], buying and selling businesses, not for anything as prosaic as providing a service to society, but simply to make money. And, as I've said, these *returns* can always be improved through greater e*fficiencies* such as redundancies, automation and cheaper raw materials. And you can now add to that a trend I've spotted recently called *shrinkflation*."[38]

"*Shrinkflation?"* asked George, bemused.

"Yeah, *shrinkflation* — when, instead of putting up their prices, a lot of retailers do sneaky things with their packaging, which makes a box of detergent or a tube of toothpaste or a bar of chocolate look the same size when it might be 10% smaller."

"So?" asked George, trying to understand why this was so bad.

"So, now the supermarket is charging the same amount for a product that's got 10% less in it!"

"Sneaky bastards…" said George quietly to himself as the penny dropped.

"It's just the latest cynical way for them to keep their profits flowing. And what do they do with these extra profits? They squirrel them away in their off-

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[37] **Return on Investment (ROI)** is a financial metric used to evaluate the profitability or efficiency of an investment relative to its cost. It measures the return or gain generated from an investment compared to the initial investment amount, expressed as a percentage or ratio. **ROI: Return on Investment https://www.investopedia.com**

[38] **Shrinkflation** — is an economic practice where manufacturers reduce the size, quantity, or quality of a product while maintaining its original price or slightly increasing it. **https://corporatefinanceinstitute.com**

shore tax havens, contributing as little as possible to the customers' lives they've just ripped off. In the world of *GRiFTing*, there's nothing that can't be exploited for financial gain. Nothing is out of bounds. It's called the *commodification of life."*[39]

"Sneaky bastards…" repeated George, still trying to process this latest revelation.

"*Financialisation* has taken over the world, George, and technology is driving it further from our day-to-day reality. High-frequency trading uses powerful computers and algorithms that trade stocks and shares in fractions of a second, the goal being to exploit market volatility and make tiny profits on each transaction over a very short period. It's a crazy way to make money, but it now represents about two-thirds of all financial activity on the planet. And, of course, humans don't get a look in."

"*The Matrix!*" blurted George in surprised recognition.

"I told you!" the Director shot back with a hollow laugh. "In the 1980s, the average stock was held for four months. Now, it's less than a second, and all of it happens without anyone watching. It's a world where things aren't created for their actual value or benefit to society but for how much they can be traded, speculated on, or rented out. And all of it happens without humans having any say in the matter.

"And naturally, this is where the multinational GRiFTing corporations thrive —shuffling cash and resources across borders, manipulating digital funds that slip past government oversight, and ensuring they pay as little tax as humanly possible."

"And that, George, is *Financialisation*."

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[39] The **commodification of life** refers to the process by which various aspects of human life—such as health, relationships, nature, and even personal identity-are turned into commodities. Medical services, once seen as a basic human need, are often commodified, leading to inequalities based on the ability to pay. Personal Identity: where companies profit from personal information and experiences. Natural resources: Water, land, and air are often privatised and commercialised. Surrogacy and egg or sperm donation for profit are further examples. **https://prospect.org**

The Director paused for breath; whenever he reminded himself of the shit-show world he now lived in, it always pushed him into a sloth of depression so, for the next couple of minutes, the two gloomy thespians walked on, lost in thoughts, staring at the lights reflected in the river.

3.5 Horseman # 4 – Tax Evasion (Getting Away With It)

Eventually, George broke the silence. "That stinks!" he said.
"The river or the *GRiFTers*?" asked the Director, somewhat amused.
"Both!" replied George, "But mostly the *GRiFTers*. The river shouldn't stink. We shouldn't be polluting rivers in this day and age. That was something we did a hundred years ago. I thought society was supposed to evolve, but we seem to be going backwards."
"We *ARE* going backwards," confirmed the Director. "Since the *Big Bang*, the *GRiFTers* have taken over the world, turning it into a dehumanised financial space of balance sheets divorced from reality.
"They don't care about rivers, the fish that live in them, the people who might want to swim in them, or even, heaven forbid, the people who hope to drink the stuff. They don't even care about climate change and the fact that their behaviour is slowly killing us. All they're interested in is profit. Nothing else matters. Capitalism really *is* like *HAL* from *2001*. We've given it enough power to do as it pleases, and it won't stop until we're all dead. There's no 'OFF' switch for capitalism."
"So what can we do about it?" asked George, still hoping for the elusive answer the Director still seemed unwilling to reveal.
"Bear with me, George, because I'm coming to that, and I honestly believe I've found this crazy system's *Achilles Heel*, so I hope you don't mind if I take one more minute to describe this last horseman?"

"Oh, of course. I was so pissed off after the first three, I almost forgot there was a fourth!" replied George sardonically.

"Thanks," acknowledged the Director, "because unless we understand what we're up against, we might not be angry enough to want to stop it."

"Agreed," confirmed George, accepting the Director's reasoning.

"OK, this last nasty little horseman is called *Tax Evasion* [40], which is relatively self-explanatory but has become an industrial-scale global scandal on steroids. At least, it ought to be a scandal, but the reality is that everyone now seems to take it for granted, which is an even bigger scandal.

"When you think about it, it's pretty weird and frankly disgusting to think that *tax havens* are tolerated in this day and age. It's pretty much a feudal sort of concept where the wealthy are allowed to have 'special' places where they can hide their money and don't have to give any back to the people who helped make them rich in the first place. It's sick. But it's all perfectly normal.

"As I've said already, thanks to *Globalisation*, *Rent Extraction* and *Financialisation*, it's no longer possible to keep track of who owns what, which conveniently makes it far easier for unethical individuals and corporations to hide their money from the tax man.

"They take the rent they extract from us, but instead of paying taxes on that unearned profit, as any responsible, law-abiding, socially-conscious citizen might be expected to do, they quietly slip off to the Cayman Islands and stash their swag away there, where no one can see it."

"Bastards," repeated George, although it didn't sound too bad coming from an American with an American accent.

The Director nodded. "Tax Evasion has almost become an art form, and given the number of creative accountants paid to find loopholes to get around the

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[40] **Tax Evasion** — the illegal practice of deliberately underreporting income, inflating deductions, or concealing assets to reduce tax liability and evade paying taxes owed to the government. **HMRC has not charged a single company over tax evasion under landmark legislation** **www.theguardian.com**

rules, I'm surprised one of them hasn't won the *Turner Prize* by now! It's a game of cat and mouse, where *GRiFTers* use third parties, obscure tax laws and elaborate subsidiaries in low-tax regions, amongst other wheezes, to evade what any decent individual would feel their duty to pay. But rules like that are for the little people. They don't apply to *GRiFTers.*

"So it's a game of cat and mouse, but the cat's a Bengal tiger, and the mouse is a… a… dormouse," suggested George, seeing his analogy may not be perfect.

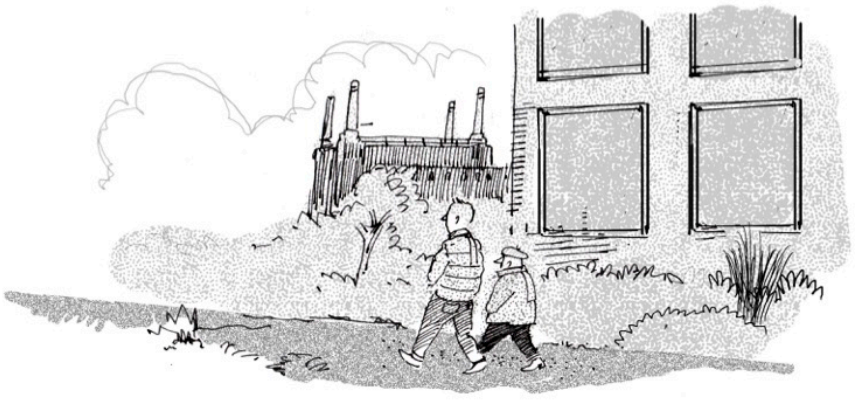
"Quite," the Director agreed sympathetically. "The explosion of the digital economy and *cryptocurrencies* [41] has made it easier than ever for the wealthy to game the system. No one knows how much corporate tax evasion costs, but it's at least half a trillion dollars a year. Yet, instead of imprisoning these tax cheats—who'd be jailed if they were ordinary citizens making mistakes on their tax returns—governments typically look the other way when it comes to GRiFTer organisations. And all of this nefarious activity is protected by the cultural hegemony that stops us from asking too many difficult questions."

"The *Heggy*, what now?" Asked George quizzically.

"*Hegemony*, George; it's a *Wizard of Oz* sort of thing, but we'll come to that later."

[41] **Cryptocurrencies or virtual currencies** operate on **decentralised networks** based on **blockchain technology**. Unlike traditional currencies issued by governments (fiat money), cryptocurrencies are not controlled by a central authority, such as a central bank. **www.investopedia.com**

4: Hammersmith To Battersea – WALK ON BY



4.1: A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall

(late–stage capitalism)

"Jeez!" blurted George, exasperated by the size and scale of the anti-capitalist evidence piling up before him. "How am I supposed to handle all of this information? If even half of what you're telling me is true, I'd have to question whether I really am who I think I am and not just a puppet of a mysterious capitalist master race. I hate to repeat myself, but you do seem to be trying to convince me I've been abducted by the *Matrix* again."

"I don't know what to tell you, George. You've just made a pretty good summary of what I'm saying!" confirmed the Director with a jaded chuckle. "I understand that it's almost too much to take in. And if we assume for a

moment that even half of what I'm saying is accurate, we have to ask ourselves how the hell we allowed ourselves to get here."

"Exactly right!" confirmed George, now beginning to wonder if there was anything he could be certain of anymore.

"But I hope you can see that's why I needed to tell the whole story first, because if you'd only heard part of it, you wouldn't have believed me!" explained the Director. "Like most people, you'd probably assume that, if things were this bad, the government would have stepped in and put a stop to it. I mean, clearly, this crazy anti-social behaviour is not good for a functioning society, so surely we wouldn't let them get away with whatever it is they're doing?"

"Exactly," agreed George, relieved that the Director seemed to understand his predicament.

"Well, if that's what you're wondering," persisted the Director," I'm afraid I've got news for you because, far from trying to stop these anti-social *GRiFTers*, the politicians are more than happy to help them.

"What's wrong with these people?" shouted George in exasperation. "Is absolutely everyone in on the scam? And when exactly was anyone going to tell me?"

"Marx predicted all this way back in 1840," explained the Director, hoping to reassure George he wasn't alone in feeling misled. "Marx imagined how this whole lousy scenario would play out, with an increasingly small but powerful number of monopolists controlling nearly all production, locked in fierce competition with each other. And, in this scenario, the most obvious losers would be the workers, who are expected to work more and be paid less to keep prices down. Eventually, he concluded that the only possible outcome from this scenario was the total collapse of the system, brought down by the weight of its own social inequality."

"Well, I think we can agree he got pretty much of it right," confirmed George.

The Director nodded, as he strode forward, staring down at his shoes and trying to avoid the muddy potholes, "Marx imagined the working class would eventually catch on and realise what was happening."

"And did they?" asked George innocently. "I mean, isn't that what your movie is trying to do? Educate the masses, sort of thing?"

"Sort of," agreed the Director. "But if Marx could see how little has changed two decades into the twenty-first century, I think he'd have to accept the capitalists have done a pretty good job of preventing the truth from getting out."

George looked at the Director's face to see if there was a hint of sarcasm in his tone, but he could only see disappointment, which made him sad.

"But it's not just Marx," continued the Director, now musing on something he seemed not to have contemplated before. "I mean, there's been a whole raft of thinkers who've come along since Marx, predicting the collapse of the capitalist system. Yet here it is; still standing, and doing pretty well for itself as far as I can see." George felt a little uneasy listening to what seemed, for the first time, to be a hint of doubt in the Director's voice.

"I mean, the Frankfurt School [1] economists predicted the *commodification of culture* [2] *in 1944,* the rise of *consumerism* and the need for increasingly *authoritarian governments* to keep the workers working. And while that's all come to pass and plain for all to see, it's still fucking here! It's still dominating our lives, making us miserable, and killing the planet. This bastard's hard to kill!"

George was shocked by this outburst, which seemed to come from nowhere.

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[1] The **Frankfurt School** was a group of mid-20th-century German thinkers originally based in Frankfurt, Germany, who further developed **Marxist theory**. **https://stanford.edu/**

[2] **The commodification of culture** refers to the process by which cultural practices, traditions, or expressions are transformed into commodities and bought and sold for profit.
Living in a material world: The Commodification of Culture https://reflect.ucl.ac.uk

The Director shifted to a more thoughtful and intellectual tone. "It isn't too difficult to make the case that capitalism is intrinsically undemocratic because it is simply a mechanism for generating profit. That's it. That's what it is. No more, no less. It has no objective other than to make money and it therefore has no moral dimension. So there will always be tension between ordinary people just looking for a fulfilling and happy life and the *Elite* who seem pathologically driven to accumulate wealth, which inevitably leads to the point we find ourselves at today: What some call *late-stage capitalism.* Spotting examples of *late-stage capitalism* is now a sort of grim game."

"Examples?" asked George, pressing for more information.

"Well, I mean, there's ironic humour in corporate emails raising staff awareness of 'mental health week' while at the same time demanding more overtime. Or radio ads for 'premium bottled air' aimed at drivers sitting in traffic jams, or $500 jeans caked in fake mud. It's all just the last tragic bullshit spasms of a society on the verge of collapse.

"Ah!" sighed George, now aware of what the Director was getting at.

And no matter how hard the *GRiFTers* try to paper over the cracks, they just can't hide the increasingly obvious signs that we are slipping into decay and discord. Just look at the levels of poverty and unemployment that have triggered the US opioid crisis; people have no other way to escape their grim reality than through drugs."

"So ironic!" commented George, shaking his head.

"How so?" asked the Director, surprised by George's reaction.

"Well, wasn't it Marx who said religion was the opium of the people?[3] asked George a little uncertainly.

"Yes, it was." Answered the Director, a little taken aback. "Was that something you covered at school?"

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[3] **What did Marx mean by 'religion is the opium of the masses'? www.enotes.com**

"No, I think it was a line from *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure"*, explained George, deadpan. "But I took it to mean that Marx saw opium as a pain reliever and that the *proletariat* [4] resorted to religion in the same way, to take away the pain of their miserable lives."

The Director was dumbfounded. George's dialectic quip perfectly summarised Marx's concept, and he vowed never to dismiss *Bill & Ted* again.

"But why ironic?" asked the Director, still trying to grasp the full extent of George's observation.

"Well, in Marx's day, religion may have been the opium of the people, but in modern America, opioids are the religion of the people."

"Beautifully put," was all the Director could think to say, beguiled by George's innocent but perceptive take on life.

Returning to the conversation, the Director dove back into his *idée fixe*: "All of which was predicted as the tell-tale signs of *late-stage capitalism:* a massive disparity between rich and poor; the rise in violent crime; a massive increase in mental health issues, especially among the young; falling educational standards; increased homelessness; growing racial inequality and the general decay in infrastructure such as roads, transport, and schools. Not to mention an electorate that's given up voting for governments they see as all the same."

"And TRUMP!" shouted George.

"Absolutely!" concurred the Director. "What illustrates a society decaying from the top down than a reality TV show star being elected president - TWICE! And let's not overlook the devastation of the ecosystem he aims to speed up while dismissing the science that shows why this will ultimately kill him and his family, which he claims to love."

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[4] **Proletariat** refers to the social class of industrial workers who must sell their labour to capitalist employers in exchange for wages or salaries. The term is central to the Marxist analysis of class struggle and capitalist society.
Proletariat (Working Class) www.oxfordbibliographies.com

"And that's what I mean when I talk about *late-stage capitalism* [5]. It's the death throes of a corrupted and compromised system that's no longer viable."
For a moment, George reflected on the three Porsches in his garage at home and the private doctor he saw every week to prescribe his antidepressants. It made him feel guilty.
Winding things up, the Director went on, "You'd think the *Great Depression* of the '30s, the *Sub-Prime Crash* of 2008 and the effects of global warming might have us question the merits of a malignant system that seems to be killing us, but not a bit of it. Despite all the chaos and inequality, it's business as usual. Whatever happened to the *three strikes and you're out* rule? Isn't it time we began exploring alternatives? Capitalism turns humans into machinery, and all we're trying to do is turn them back into humans "
"Doesn't seem too much to ask," agreed George.
"But there's a reason we don't, which I'll now quickly explain," said the Director. "And after that, I promise we'll move on to something more upbeat. Something I believe is a nice, gentle, uplifting, and achievable solution that can still save all our skins. Up for that, George?"
George nodded. This was a teasing cliffhanger he couldn't refuse.

4.2: Everybody Hurts

So with Frankenstein rampaging across the countryside, forcing us serfs to cower in our hovels, high on opioids, in fear of school shootings or of simply breaking a leg and being unable to afford the medical bills, you'd think there'd be more of us asking whether capitalism had something to do with it.

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[5] **Late—Stage Capitalism** describes a state of extreme wealth inequality, economic instability, social unrest, and systemic contradictions. It suggests that capitalism has reached a point of decline where its inherent contradictions and injustices become unsustainable.
We live in a time of 'late capitalism,' but what does that mean? And what's so late about it?
https://phys.org

"You'd think," agreed George.

"So why do you think we just sit back and let this catastrophe unfold?" asked the Director, glancing over at George, who was still plodded along the towpath like the slow but faithful carthorse *Boxer* in *Animal Farm*.

"I don't know," George shrugged. "but I suspect it might have something to do with that *Heggy* thing?"

The Director laughed at this. "Very good, George, very good! We'll make an *anarcho-syndicalist* [6] of you yet. Maybe if you'd been more of a political junkie or you'd studied economics at university, you'd already know most of what I'm telling you here, but most ordinary folks rarely hear any sort of rational criticism of the capitalist system. Partly because we're just too busy putting food on the table and *getting by,* but mostly because, in many ways, we prefer certainty over uncertainty."

George nodded in agreement. "We don't like to rock the apple cart."

"That's right," agreed the Director. "We enjoy watching ads on the telly, thinking about which iPhone to buy next, mulling over where to go on our next holiday. All of which seems a lot more fun than asking deep and difficult questions we don't have the answer to."

"Questions such as *Is this the best way to live my life?*" contributed George helpfully.

"Exactly," agreed the Director. "We're essentially signed-up members of the capitalist country club, where we feel safe and accepted amongst our friends, rather than go outside to face the cold, hard reality that our lifestyle choices are slowly killing us. And rather than confront this very unwelcome truth, we're all too happy to keep taking the pills handed out by the *GRiFTers* like *Smarties* at a birthday party."

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[6] **Anarcho—syndicalism** is a political philosophy that combines principles of anarchism and syndicalism, which promotes workers' self—management, direct action, and the abolition of both the state and capitalism.

"*Smarties*?" asked George.

"Don't worry about it," replied the Director, not wanting to be tripped up at this critical point in his story.

"Is this when you ask me to take the *Red Pill* or the *Blue Pill*?" [7] laughed George.

"Just because I'm paranoid doesn't mean they're not after me", shot back the Director, equally amused.

"But let me tell you about this *Heggy* thing, George, and then you can decide whether I'm crazy or not."

"My mind will remain open like a parachute," George assured rather grandly.

"Thanks, I appreciate that," replied the Director with a nod. "So, we often overlook these topics because they simply don't enter our minds. Their flaws and failings hardly ever occur to us, which may seem odd considering what we've been discussing for the past three hours."

"Now that I think about it, that does seem a bit strange," George confessed, sounding curious.

"I understand you're not particularly political, George, but considering our discussion, don't you think these important issues deserve your attention?"

"Absolutely!" George replied with enthusiasm. "I waste way too much time watching celebrity boxing matches on TikTok and YouTube. I'm just killing time out of boredom. But it would never cross my mind to think about politics or the environment instead."

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[7] The **red pill** and **blue pill** are metaphorical terms representing a choice between the willingness to learn a potentially unsettling or life—changing truth by taking the "red pill" or remaining in the contented experience of ordinary reality with the "blue pill" (i.e. the reality principle or the pleasure principle. The terms originate from the 1999 film *The Matrix*.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Red_pill_and_blue_pill

"You're not alone," the Director reassured. "It's perfectly understandable that you haven't given this much thought. In fact, the digital content we lap up for hours every day is specifically designed to distract you from such ideas. After all, how can the *GRiFTers* profit if their consumers are worrying about climate change? What the GRiFTers want instead is distracting 'sticky' content that keeps us online longer - all the better for persuading us to buy even more stuff we don't need."

"I guess, that's just the way it is," agreed George.

"Ah! A sentiment so eloquently expressed by *Bruce Hornsby and the Range* in their 1986 classic." Replied the Director excitedly, suddenly bursting in to an out-of-tune rendition of the song's first few lines and making George jump with surprise.

"Standing in line marking time, waiting for the welfare dime
'Cause they can't buy a job.
The man in the silk suit hurries by
As he catches the poor old ladies' eyes just for fun, he says,
Get a job.
That's just the way it is,
Some things will never change
That's just the way it is,
But don't you believe them…"

George had a flashback to his own dad singing this song (also badly) when he was a kid, which made him warm to the Director even more.

"I guess that's right," was all he could think of to say, once the Director had mercifully stopped.

"Capitalism is everywhere," reflected the Director. "It dictates how we live our lives, how we feel when we go to work, how we relate to our bosses, how we plan our careers. That's how our parents made a living and how we expect our kids to do the same. Sure, every four or five years, we vote for a right or left-

wing version of the same greed-based capitalism system, and every time we think that, this time, it's going to make a difference. But it never does. Whatever you choose from the menu, they are really just different flavours of the same TV dinner."

"Hmmm. Dinner! thought George to himself, momentarily distracted.

"And if we had the imagination for a moment to think outside this box, we'd quickly be labelled an *anarchist* [8] or a *communist* [9], as though that was a sort of criminal *thought-crime* [10] and almost nobody does that because they'd be labelled a nutter and possibly a danger to society."

"You can't call someone a nutter these days," counselled George gently.

"You're right," agreed the Director, "but if you refuse to buy into the current system, you'd be considered a person with a potential mental health condition."

"Better," nodded George approvingly.

"Thanks," acknowledged the Director, "because, in our current society, it's easy to assume capitalism is the only game in town, and that there are no reasonable alternatives and that it would therefore be a waste of time to even try to think about looking for one. That's just the way it is."

"Yes, I see!" responded George quickly, keen to stop the Director from grasping his chance to sing more Bruce Hornsby.

George was also becoming a little irritable. He'd been fine earlier when the Director was giving him a history lesson but, in the past hour, these questions

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[8] An **anarchist** is someone who advocates for the abolition of all forms of hierarchical authority, including the state, capitalism, and other systems of domination and coercion.
What Is Anarchy? Definition and Examples www.thoughtco.com

[9] A **communist** is someone who seeks a classless, stateless society based on common ownership and the principles of equality, solidarity, and social justice.
What Is Communism? Definition and Examples www.thoughtco.com

[10] **Thoughtcrime** is a term coined by George Orwell in his dystopian novel *1984*. It refers to the act of holding thoughts or beliefs that are deemed illegal or unacceptable by the ruling authority.
https://dictionary.cambridge.org

around whether capitalism was really all it was made out to be, had unsettled him. As though he'd accidentally stepped into a parallel universe where black was white and the good guys were really the bad guys. And he wasn't sure who to believe any more. Meanwhile, the Director could see from George's face that he had unsettled his leading man. After all, George was a proud American who'd have spent his childhood saluting the Stars and Stripes while constantly being warned about the dangers of Communism. So, suggesting that capitalism was actually a coercive and dangerous form of mind control was bound to be a disconcerting concept.

"Feeling OK, George?" asked the Director sympathetically. "Allowing yourself to think outside the box like this always feels unsettling at first, but don't worry, we're just spitballing here. Nothing terrible is going to happen. I won't report you to the *Un-American Activities Committee*. You're not going to be run out of Hollywood."

George knew all about the *Un-American Activities Committee* [11], having appeared in a straight-to-video movie called *The Red Peril* early in his career. As he reflected on this, he realised the conversation he was now having with the Director would have got him blacklisted back in the '50s.

"You don't think we'll be ostracised for making the Dragon movie, do you?" asked George earnestly, now concerned that his association with this particular Director might not be so great for his career.

"Who can say? Though I seem to remember that Clooney once did a movie with Ken Loach[12], and *he* still seems to find work," lied the Director playfully.

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[11] The **Un-American Activities Committee** was a committee which sat within the United States House of Representatives established in 1938. It was created to investigate alleged disloyalty and subversive activities by individuals or organisations suspected of having communist or fascist ties. **HUAC www.history.com**

[12] **Ken Loach** (born 17 June 1936) is a socialist film director and screenwriter. His critical directing style and socialism are evident in his film treatment of social issues such as poverty (Poor Cow, 1967), homelessness (Cathy Come Home, 1966), and labour rights (Riff—Raff, 1991, and The Navigators, 2001). **https://en.wikipedia.org**

This made George feel better despite having never heard of that Loach guy. Anything that involved Clooney was good enough for George.

"But what this does show us, George, is just how pervasive this need to defend capitalism is within a capitalist system. The *GRiFTers* and their political stooges don't want you to think about potential alternatives to their money-making scheme.

"I guess that's what you'd call a *thoughtcrime*?" conceded George.

"An excellent example of what I'm talking about and a very good demonstration of that *Heggy* thing I mentioned earlier. The thing that Gramsci called *Cultural Hegemony* [13]. Have you heard of Gramsci, George?" enquired the Director, not feeling optimistic.

"Can't say as I have," replied George, "unless he was part of the 1950s *Yankees* team that won the *World Series*, which, given where this conversation is headed, I doubt."

"No, he didn't play for the *Yankees*, though he was Italian like Joe DiMaggio, but I imagine the similarities end there."

"Oh well, it was worth a shot," George reflected. "So, tell me about Gramsci."

"Sure! Antonio Gramsci was the founder of the Italian Communist Party in the 1930s. He spent the last eleven years of his life imprisoned, thanks to Mussolini, who didn't like him or his ideas very much."

"That's unfortunate," commiserated George.

"Benito Mussolini[14] was a fascist dictator, which, as dictators go, is the worst sort. Being a fascist, he recognised that Gramsci's ideas posed a threat to the

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[13] **Cultural Hegemony** is a concept developed by Antonio Gramsci to explain how the dominant class in society shapes and influences the prevailing culture, worldview, and social order in ways that reinforce its own interests and maintain its power and privilege.
What Is Cultural Hegemony? www.thoughtco.com

[14] **Benito Mussolini** (1883–1945) founded the Fascist movement in Italy and was the country's dictator from 1922 to 1943. He played a key role in the transformation of Italy into a totalitarian state during the interwar period. He was captured by Italian partisans in April 1945 and executed by firing squad, and his body was publicly displayed from a lamp—post in Milan.

nice little set-up he'd engineered with the Italian people. Not surprising really, given that Gramsci was trying to warn his compatriots that the lessons Italian children were being taught in school and the dreams they were sold through advertising once they grew up were a form of brainwashing designed to make the working classes compliant. This was something he called the *Cultural Hegemony*.

"Ah, yes—the *hegemony*!" George said, nodding knowingly.

"That's right," confirmed the Director. "Gramsci's ideas also explained how this *hegemony* made it difficult to think critically about capitalism and why it felt weird even to doubt what *Il Duce*[15] was selling them. Fifty years earlier, Marx had called this same sort of thing *false consciousness.* Similarly, in 1964, the German socialist philosopher Herbert Marcuse [16] described a *"one-dimensional society, where people are encouraged to conform to a narrow range of values, with a focus on material possessions and immediate gratification".*

"More recently, the British philosopher Mark Fisher called it *Capitalist Realism*[17] and suggested that it closed the mind to alternative economic systems and stifled political action. And that's precisely what Benny Mussolini was trying to do to Italian society in the 1930s. Obviously, he was keen to keep this under his black fez hat, perhaps sensing that if the working class

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[15] **"Il Duce"** (Italian for "The Leader") was the title adopted by **Benito Mussolini**, the fascist dictator of Italy who ruled the country from 1922 to 1943.

[16] **Herbert Marcuse** (1898–1979) was a German—American philosopher, sociologist, and political theorist known for his influential critiques of capitalist society, consumer culture, and technology, as well as his advocacy for radical social change.

[17] **Capitalist Realism** suggests that capitalism is the only viable economic and political system and that alternatives are inconceivable or impossible to achieve. Capitalist Realism is characterised by a sense of resignation, cynicism, and acceptance of the status quo, even in the face of social, economic, and environmental crises.
Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative? By Mark Fisher www.univ.ox.ac.uk

ever found out, he'd be left swinging (from a lamppost). Funny how things work out…

"So you see, George, criticising capitalism isn't easy, not for Gramsci, Mark Fisher, Herbert Marcuse, or me or you."

"I'm afraid you're not making me feel any more comfortable," responded George, sounding even more sanguine.

"I can see that from your face," the director replied, smiling sympathetically. "Isn't it interesting how subversive thoughts that tempt us to tread outside our social conditioning can make us uncomfortable? Capitalism really does have a sort of mind control over us, and we really are programmed not to ask too many awkward questions."

George was lost in thought, contemplating the bewildering emotions this new information stirred inside him. The last time he had experienced anything similar was during a David Blaine performance when he'd been pulled from the crowd and asked to hammer a nail into Blaine's hand. This conversation with the Director evoked a similar unsettling feeling, yet now it seemed as if the nail was slowly being driven into his own head. He wished the Director would pause and let these new revelations register. Or maybe he just wanted him to stop talking altogether because he didn't want to think about it any more. Unfortunately for George, the Director was in no mood to slow down.

"Actually," continued the Director, "this is precisely why I made the dragon film in the first place because, if I'd challenged capitalism head-on with a more fact-based documentary style, the studios would have run a mile — and I wouldn't have blamed them. There simply isn't an audience for this sort of story because mainstream cinema-goers would rather not think about unsettling stuff like this. In fact, when I ran the original script past a couple of producers, they both said it was too far-fetched, too serious and too depressing, and no one would pay money to watch it. So, after some back-and-forth, it dawned on me the only way I'd get it made would be to disguise it as

something else; dress it up as an allegory. Frame it as a story about dragons and let the audience think it was just an action- fantasy. That way, I could trick them into watching something enjoyable and only afterwards have them realise it was about the way we all blindly support capitalism and that we've somehow become addicted to the money and power it promises. Using one story to tell another is an old trick. Swift did it with *Gulliver's Travels,* Orwell did it with *Animal Farm,* William Golding did it with *The Lord of the Flies.* It's just a way to get around *the hegemony*; to fly it under the radar without the audience realising you're subverting them."

"Clever," nodded George, aware he'd fallen into this trap himself.

"However, it's challenging to execute. How do you make an audience recognise the issue when they're so close to it? Or, in capitalism's case, when they're completely immersed in it? No offence, George, but considering you were the lead in my movie and still missed the underlying message, it clearly illustrates why we must simplify these concepts for the well-meaning, middle-class *eco-worriers* such as yourself if we want to expose the truth lurking underneath."

"Oh, no offence taken," replied George, somewhat offended.

"So," the Director continued, "maybe it's a stroke of luck that we're now strolling along this lovely old towpath at ten-thirty in the evening, and I have the chance to lay out my thoughts for you in all their gory details."

George nodded, though he was still unsure whether he agreed. Part of him felt he'd been duped or ambushed, but then remembered he'd been the one to instigate the conversation and therefore only had himself to blame.

"But, if you allow me, I have one last *coda* to add." requested the Director.

"Be my guest," replied George, unsure what a coda might be but hoping it didn't take long.

"I'm no expert," accepted the Director, "but I wonder whether Gramsci really appreciated just how deeply entangled his countrymen were in the capitalist

dream: That they weren't just passive hostages but, rather, willing collaborators, more than happy to keep popping those Soma pills and ignoring the cliff edge, just so long as they didn't have to face reality."

4.3: Mad World

"Interesting," said George, already anticipating the cheerful lights of the Albert Bridge beyond the next bend in the river and, after that, the huge silhouette of Battersea Power Station. He also knew that within that massive structure nestled his lavish hotel and, inside that, a delicious supper awaited.

This seemingly interminable walk was nearing its end, and with it, George hoped, the Director's relentless monologue. But with the finish line now in sight, George felt a flicker of renewed enthusiasm stir within him, and he decided to engage with the Director's ideas one last time.

"So, are we so dumb that we can't see that capitalism is just a giant *Ponzi scheme*?" [18] he asked, hoping to show the Director how closely he'd followed the argument so far.

"Sadly, my friend, as I said right at the start of the evening, I'm afraid we are. And on top of that, we're lazy, and we don't like to have to think. And on top of *that*, we're hubristic, so we assume we're somehow immune to the bad things heading our way. Other than that, yep, I think we're in great shape!"

"That's a bleak view, sir. If all this is true, are you sure we're worth saving?"

"An interesting question," replied the Director thoughtfully. "I sometimes wonder if our lovely, innocent planet isn't generating a fever designed to wipe out its human virus. And part of me wouldn't blame it if it was. But are we worth saving? It's a question I've pondered many times, and as I look at the

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[18] **A Ponzi scheme** is a type of fraudulent investment scheme that promises high returns to investors with little or no risk. The scheme operates by using funds from new investors to pay returns to earlier investors, rather than generating legitimate profits through productive investments or business activities.

horrific things we humans are capable of inflicting on each other, not to mention what we do to other species, I wonder if we haven't accidentally mutated into something quite monstrous. Yet, now and then, when I'm riding the Tube and I witness a small act of kindness between strangers, it will move me to tears, because it reminds me of the beauty we humans can show one another when abstract ideas like politics or religion aren't getting in the way. In those moments, I realise that, given the right conditions, the world could truly be a paradise. So, I keep going."

"I know what you mean," said George reflectively, prompting the Director to want to hug him. "But, if an alien arrived on Earth tomorrow," the Director continued, dampening what could have been a lovely moment, "they'd probably assume we're part of an insane death cult."

"Really?" questioned George. "You're comparing capitalism to a cult now?

"I know it sounds crazy, but hear me out on this because it isn't so weird when you examine it. It's just the *hegemony* that stops us from seeing it."

"Go on," replied George sceptically, "but you're going to have to work hard to convince me on this one."

"OK," replied the Director, accepting the challenge. "It might sound crazy, but capitalism bears all the hallmarks of a stone-cold cult [19]. Think about it for a minute: First of all, cult members never recognise they're in a cult."

"True, but that's maybe because we're also NOT PART OF A CULT!" laughed George, "but keep going, I'm listening."

"OK, well, how about the fact that a cult sets up an *Us* vs. *Them* situation, which means you'll be treated with hostility if you don't support the cult. You'll be called a communist or something and cast out of society. I think we've agreed that's also the case with capitalism."

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[19] **A cult** is a social group or movement characterised by devotion to a particular leader, ideology, belief system, or set of practices that are often regarded as unconventional, extremist, or outside the mainstream of society. Cults typically exhibit elements of intense devotion, charismatic leadership, group conformity, and isolation from mainstream society.

"I guess," replied George, still unable to refute what remained to him a far-fetched argument.

"What's more, cults also go in for emotional manipulation, with the cult leader often brainwashing their congregation to the point where they are no longer able to criticise their leader's actions. And, if you agree with Gramsci about the *hegemony*, that's what capitalism does through its marketing, advertising, and education.

"I guess that's also true," confirmed George grudgingly, his scepticism slowly draining away.

"But the main reason capitalism doesn't feel like a cult is that cults tend to be fringe groups that challenge the accepted norms of the status quo. In this case, however, capitalism IS the dominant narrative accepted by the mainstream. It feels like the accepted status quo, so it doesn't feel like a cult. But that doesn't mean that it isn't one. Perhaps it's simply the most successful cult in history—one that's now so mainstream that it smothers even the faintest hint of criticism or alternative thinking.

"I guess that could also be true," agreed George again, beginning to see this wasn't such a crazy comparison after all.

"Yes, and it’s also true that cults set up counter-intuitive arguments and, in the *real world,* GRiFTers do something similar through their client politicians whom they pay to lobby, fund or outright bribe—all this talk of communism, socialism, immigration, criminal gangs and the rest of it are all just scare stories designed to divert our attention from the real villains making our lives so desperate. Listen to the politicians, and you'd think that everyone is out to steal your money through taxes or will abuse your goodwill if you ever let your guard down. We get so bombarded by the propaganda designed to support the status quo, it’s hard to see any other alternative."

George had now stopped trying to argue.

"But finally, and most importantly," pressed the Director, "cults manipulate their members into thinking that all sorts of crazy ideas are perfectly normal."
"Such as?" asked George, still clinging to a thread of scepticism.
"Well, consider your typical high-powered executive," proposed the Director. "Isn't it strange how the modern-day Dr. Jekyll seems like a perfectly decent human when he's at home—playing with his kids and helping out his neighbours—but when Monday morning rolls around, he transforms into a sort of power-mad, ruthless Mr. Hyde?"
"Really?" asked George sceptically, still unable to buy this extreme characterisation.
"Sure, I know it sounds odd, but just think about it for a moment. At home, these high-powered businesspeople seem like warm, generous humans, taking their kids to swimming lessons and helping with local charities. But sit them behind their desk in a prestigious corner office, and they become sharp-elbowed predators—cold, competitive, and willing to do whatever it takes to succeed."
"I suppose…" agreed George reluctantly.
"Consider this, George: how many people do you know in your cut-throat world who seem like lovely people when you first meet them, but then, when you're discussing your contract, they turn cold and businesslike, and all that humanity just drains out of them."
"Well, these days I get my agents to handle all that," offered George in mitigation.
"You make my point perfectly!" agreed the Director quietly. The fact that you're willing to pay someone 15% of your earnings to do the nasty stuff for you, because you're hopeless at being ruthless, is a great example of how different the business world is from the 'real' world, where we try to be nice and considerate to each other. When an executive is in *business mode,* they'll lie, cheat, bully, pollute, cut down rainforests, offer bribes — you name it, if it

helps climb the greasy pole. And, what's more, they'll encourage the rest of us to do the same, and Adam Smith's *Invisible Hand* will be applauding him all the way to the top."

"Are you absolutely sure?" asked George, who was having a hard time swallowing this particularly bitter pill, while also wondering if it's possible to hear the sound of one hand clapping.

"I am!" shot back the Director. "I've been in the marketing game long enough to watch tobacco executives swear blind that cigarettes don't cause cancer, and pharmaceutical execs sell cheap drugs at massive markups, knowing full well that millions of poor, sick people wouldn't be able to afford them. And you'd think water was a basic human right, wouldn't you?"

"Yes?" replied George, feeling like he'd accidentally kicked a hornet's nest.

"Yes, you would," agreed the Director, "but not for *Nestlé*, which has found a way to make money by buying the rights to community drinking wells, cutting off the water supply to those communities, and then selling that same water back to them in plastic bottles! [20] Look it up if you don't believe me.

"In the past, Nestlé even sent out women dressed as nurses to better convince vulnerable, poorly educated mothers that their own breast milk wasn't good enough for their babies—and that if they really cared for their children, they ought to feed them *Nestlé Baby Formula* instead. [21]

"The executives making those decisions are not faceless automatons; they are real people who go home at night, eat meals with their families, and go to bed with a clear conscience—happily brainwashed into believing that what they're doing is right. All in the grubby pursuit of a few extra bucks. Or rather, $11.5

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[20] **While Nestlé extracts millions of litres from their land, residents have no drinking water** **www.theguardian.com**

[21] **Baby formula marketing 'pervasive, misleading and aggressive' – UN report** **https://news.un.org** "The judge warned Nestlé that if the company did not want to face accusations of causing death and illness through sales practices such as using sales reps dressed in nurses' uniforms, they should change the way that they did business." **www.theguardian.com**

billion extra bucks. And when there's that sort of money to be made, morals go out of the window."

"Disgusting," said George, finding it hard to digest this information.

"One more?" asked the Director, keen to drive home the point beyond doubt.

"If you must," replied George, sounding defeated.

"Well, this is closer to home and more recent, George. Have you ever heard of *OxyContin*?" [22]

"Heard of it?! It killed my cousin! He busted his leg playing college ball, got hooked on painkillers, and before we knew it, he was shooting up heroin. The Sackler family might as well have put the needle in his arm themselves. So yeah, I know all about *OxyContin*..."

The Director blinked, momentarily stunned by this revelation. "Can I tell you more about it?"

George leaned back, arms crossed. "Be my guest."

"Well, as you obviously know, George, *OxyContin* was an opioid painkiller pushed onto the market by Purdue Pharma in 1996. By 2000, it was clear that patients weren't just using it for pain—they were getting high on it too."

"No shit, Sherlock," George scoffed. "It was opium. What the hell did they expect would happen?"

And before long, patients wanted stronger and stronger doses, which made a lot of doctors very concerned. So they went to Purdue for answers and got the same reassuring bullshit in return — *No problem, we've done our research, it isn't addictive. Oh, and if they ask for a higher dose, just give them the stronger pills."*

George shook his head in resignation.

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[22] **The OxyContin opioid crisis** linked to the Sackler family and their company, Purdue Pharma, is one of the most significant public health disasters in modern American history. OxyContin was prescribed by doctors as a pain reliever was quickly linked to drug abuse and addiction. Purdue was aware of this, but actively misled doctors, regulators, and the public to protect its profits.

"Next thing you know, people who'd taken *OxyContin* because they'd twisted an ankle were selling their houses, sleeping in cars and robbing stores so they could buy their next hit of street heroin. The last time I looked, over 700,000 innocent people had died, and there are millions more still addicted, with their lives in ruins.

"That bastard Sackler family are as addicted to money as my cousin was to *H...*" summarised George, shrugging, as if to say, *'what can you do?'*

Seeing how dejected George looked, the Director wondered how anyone could have experienced this in their own lives and still not be raging against the system that had allowed it. But, after a brief pause to reflect and let the tension dissipate, the Director went on, "*Dragon Capitalists* will do anything for a profit—even start wars."

"Wars?" Asked George, now looking a little broken.

"Sure; take Darfur. You know what that's really about?"

George just shrugged again. He had no idea where or what Darfur was, let alone why a war might be happening there.

The Director could tell this wasn't exactly on George's radar, so he kept it simple. "There's a civil war in Darfur, George. Africa. Millions are dead or starving. On the surface, it looks like a tribal disagreement, but if you dig a little deeper, you discover that foreign actors are fighting over gold reserves. It's always just about the money."

"Foreign actors?" asked George, deeply confused. "What, like Gérard Depardieu?"

"No!" replied the Director, momentarily irritated by George's ignorance, "I'm talking about Egypt, Iran, Russia and the UAE, amongst others, financing proxy armies for their own ends: Look at almost any war, and I guarantee you'll find a man behind it looking for more money and power."

"Putin?" asked George.

"Money and power," affirmed the Director.

"Trump?"
"Money and power."
"Netanyahu?"
"Yep, him too—money and power. They're all so insecure that they feel a weird need to prove something or leave a legacy. Someone should tell them we all end up dead, and those who remain move on."
"Christopher Walken once gave me similar advice," reflected George. "He said, *If you know how quickly people forget the dead, you'd stop living to impress them*."
"Yeah, he's a smart guy," agreed the Director, I think he was paraphrasing Marcus Aurelius *Soon you will have forgotten all things, and soon all things will have forgotten you* [23]. So don't tell me I'm exaggerating about ruthless capitalism, because I could list examples like this until next year and still barely scratch the surface. The truth is much uglier than we like to imagine, so most of us try not to think about it—and look the other way."
George sat with that thought momentarily, still struggling to take it all in. But after weighing the evidence and remembering his poor, dead cousin, found slumped in a public lavatory, he couldn't shake the feeling that the Director was probably right.
And finally, while you might question my comparing capitalism to a cult, consider *Jim Jones* [24] or *David Koresh* [25]: both of them were cult leaders, and both of them asked their followers to kill themselves."
"Oh, come on!" exclaimed George mildly outraged. "I can just about buy the idea that corporations start wars, and have us kill others, but I'm not sure they'd have the ability to have us kill ourselves!"

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[23] **The Meditations Of Marcus Aurelius** - **https://meditations.mx/** -

[24] **Jim Jones** - the Jonestown Massacre - **www.theguardian.com**

[25] **David Koresh** - Branch Davidians - Waco - **www.thearda.com**

"Well, not directly, George—but think about it for a second," responded the Director in a dead tone. "Isn't that *exactly* what they're doing when they tell us to ignore the facts about climate change? When they insist we shouldn't believe the scientists or the mountains of data that irrefutably show we're killing ourselves? It's just like the salesmen at Purdue Pharma telling doctors OxyContin wasn't addictive—even when all the science showed it was. They don't care about us—they just want to keep the profits rolling in. It's insanity."

George was now disoriented, almost to the point of delirium, beginning to doubt just about everything he'd previously assumed was real.

"But people can't be the same at work as they are at home," he reasoned, grasping for a way out. "Of course, business is ruthless—if everyone were nice to each other at work, nothing would get done."

"Says who?" shot back the Director sharply. "And how much should we *get done*, anyway?" He bracketed the phrase with exaggerated air quotes. "Maybe that's just another myth that goes unchallenged.

"How much does a doctor get done during a hospital shift? Or a teacher when the bell rings to start the school day? What about a social worker or someone in a charity? How much do *they* get done?"

He didn't wait for an answer.

"The truth is, they all get an *awful* lot done—because they're deeply motivated and genuinely care about their work. And that motivation goes way beyond calculating how much money they'll make that day. They don't work hard for a bonus or a pay rise, George. They work hard because they care. Because they find helping other people deeply satisfying.

"So don't feed me this BS that we all need to be ambitious and ruthless to succeed in our careers, as if nothing else matters. We're so brainwashed by the dragon into believing money is the only thing that counts—when all around us, in our daily lives, there are millions of people quietly proving that just isn't true.

"And more than that—as we've already said—true wealth isn't measured in money anyway. If we're willing to see past this myth, we might just realise we're already richer than we ever imagined."

"You might be right," George conceded hesitantly as he pondered this argument.

"I *am* right, George—we just don't see it!" insisted the Director. "In fact, we're so wrapped up in the capitalist cult we're practically suffering from *Stockholm Syndrome* [26] we've somehow fallen in love with our captors! But now, thanks to climate change, it's time to wake up and see the GRiFTers for what they really are: a morally bankrupt system, devoid of human emotion or empathy, hell-bent on accumulating money, whatever the cost.

"You know, George," continued the Director, now winding up this particular module of his dissertation, "for the past three years, I've been looking into the climate crisis, trying to understand what we can do about it. I didn't start with some grand political agenda, and I had no idea what the solution might be—my only goal was to prevent a disaster.

"So, realising that capitalism was at the heart of the problem? That was a *revelation*. I even wondered if, through all the research I'd been doing, I'd accidentally radicalised myself. That I'd somehow become a communist by mistake!

"Believe me, I never set out to embrace Marxism—far from it—but I started to find Karl Marx making more and more sense. And in reality, of course, that was simply because I was asking the questions I'd never asked before. And those questions began to expose all the lies capitalism had been dripping into my ear since I was a kid.

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[26] **Stockholm Syndrome** is a phenomenon where hostages or victims of abduction develop feelings of sympathy, empathy, or even affection towards their captors or abusers. It is named after a bank robbery that took place in Stockholm, Sweden, in 1973, during which hostages developed positive feelings towards their captors.

"And then," the Director said, leaning in a little closer, "having had this epiphany, I realised that, far from radicalising myself, I'd actually been *de-radicalising* myself—from the false narrative I'd been fed my whole life. A narrative of selfishness that capitalism had tricked me into believing.

"I was beginning to see that encouraging selfishness and greed in a finite world is completely illogical—and that, if we want to create a world that makes sense, we need to work with each other. It's not exactly rocket science."

"But this sort of thinking threatens the entire capitalist system. So, to defend itself, it distorts how we see the world. And just like the dragon that's addicted to power, we need to recognise that same addiction in ourselves—and start acting on it."

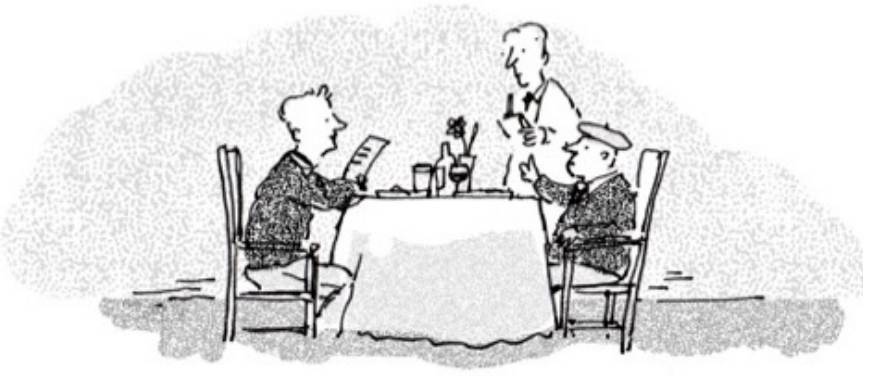
The Director had been in full flow for the past ten minutes, and George had dutifully listened for the whole time, unable to get a word in edgeways, even if he'd tried.

But now the bright lights of the hotel were in view, and the welcoming doorman, who had struck up an amiable friendship with George over the past few weeks, tipped his hat and opened the door to them.

With a quiet hint of pride, George ushered the Director in before him.

The long walk toward a post-capitalist awakening was over.

5: Late–Night Meal – CAN'T GET NO SATISFACTION



5.1. Mind Blowing Decisions

George motioned the Director toward the restaurant, aware that it was 10:45 p.m. and the staff would soon be preparing to close.

At the entrance, the *maître d'* greeted the two celebrities with a demure smile, aware that the other diners would be glancing up from their meals, eager to catch sight of celebrities dining together.

The two friends lowered their weary limbs into the plush seats very much relieved to have finally reached their destination. Their feet ached, their stomachs were empty and George's brain, at least, felt very very jumbled.

As they took in their new environment, the Director leaned in with a furtive smile to ask, "So, George, tell me—has my little critique revealed anything new to you yet?"

"Hardly a LITTLE critique," teased George. "More like watching four hours of *TED Talks* back to back. But don't get me wrong, it has been very thought-

provoking. "I was aware of some of it, but I had never thought about it all together like this, and it really changes things."
"Do you understand why that is?" the Director asked.
"Could it have anything to do with the *hegemony*?" asked George playfully.
"You're learning!" replied the Director with a chuckle, his dark little eyes still twinkling.
At this point, they both began browsing the menus they'd been given.
"I'm afraid we are all out of the quail," said the *Maitre'd* apologetically, "but the turbot is particularly good."
"Thank you," replied the Director. "We'll hurry, as it's rather late."
"Take your time," offered the *Maitre'd* generously, pleased to be serving such distinguished guests, and unaware he'd regret those words almost two hours later when they'd finally get up to leave.
George and the Director quickly ordered, with the Director selecting an expensive wine to celebrate the end of the project and the chance he'd been given to talk about his passion at with his leading man.
However, with logistics out of the way, the Director was once again ready to pick up where he'd left off on the towpath. "Up for some more political discourse?" he asked keenly.
"Press on!" replied George, bracing himself for the next instalment.
"Well, we've finished exploring how we ended up with capitalism and what a shit show that's turned out to be."
"I agree,' George confirmed. "Yet it continues to thrive, thanks to the *hegemony* which holds society in a sort of headlock…" keen to show he'd been paying attention remained loyal to the Director.
"So all we need now is something better to put in its place." Said the Director, sounding positive.
"I'll drink to that!" toasted George with the newly opened *chablis*, hoping he'd finally get some solid advice on what to do with his life.

The two clinked their glasses, just as George and Alice had done six hours earlier at the wrap party.

"OK, so this is what I'm going to do," proposed the Director, aware that his willing friend operated better when he had a road map in front of him.

"I'll explain how we currently define a successful economy and why that's the wrong thing to measure. Then, I'll explain why I think Adam Smith was wrong when he came up with the idea of the *Invisible Hand*. And finally, I'll offer you my vision of the future that doesn't involve a global meltdown. How does that sound?"

"Fan-dab-a-doozy!" exclaimed George, unsure what else to say. He'd secretly hoped the Director has simply cut to the chase and left out all the technical details, but he also knew the Director wanted to leave no stone unturned. After all, who knows, the Director might be secretly planning to write a book off the back of their epic conversation… "OK, let's get to it."

George also felt renewed enthusiasm as an enormous *surf & turf* Texan-style rack of ribs with a seafood side-order arrived just at the moment the Director began to speak again.

"Right now, the only thing you hear from politicians is *'we've got to increase GDP'* as though this will miraculously solve all of our problems. But, of course, that's nonsense. In fact, it'll just make things worse."

"I'm shorry?" Asked George, his mouth full of food. "Whatsh dish *GEEDEEPEE*?"

"Ah, apologies", replied the Director, trying not to look disgusted by George's table manners while making a mental note not to try to persuade George to switch to a vegan diet just yet. "*GDP* or *Gross Domestic Product* [27], to give it its full name, measures the value of all goods and services that a country

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[27] **Gross Domestic Product (GDP)** is a key indicator used by economists, policymakers, and investors to assess the health and performance of a country's economy. It measures the total value of all the goods and services the country produced over a year or a quarter.
www.bankofengland.co.uk

produces over a given period. It's the sort of clipboard hung at the foot of a hospital bed that politicians like to consult to diagnose whether the economy is healthy or not. We assume the doctors know what they are doing when they're poring over these charts. However, after assessing the patient's health and instructing the nurses to adjust the meds, they'll walk away without a second thought. Look at the charts yourself and you'll see the economic equivalent of kindergarten scribbles and cartoons. It's shocking. These so-called experts know far less than they make out because economics is such an inexact science — more an art form, really — and *GDP* is such a very crude measure of the health of an economy that it's more like quackery than medicine. Even so, when *GDP* goes up, it's all high-fives and champagne for the city traders. If it goes down, there'll be no bonus for you this year and austerity for the poor."

As the Director explained all this, George busied himself with his steak. The mention of hospital beds reminded him of the two disastrous episodes of ER in which he'd appeared at the start of his career.

"But hold your horses because GDP only tells us if the pie is growing," resumed the Director.

"Plot twist!" Said George.

"That's right," agreed the Director, "because, even if the pie is growing that doesn't mean that everyone gets a bigger piece for themselves, or that the quality of our lives will improve if there's more pie being made, or we'll all be any happier once the pie has been eaten. It certainly doesn't guarantee the environment will be any better managed. In fact, when GDP increases, the environment generally suffers even more. It's no coincidence that the countries with the highest GDP also have the highest greenhouse gas emissions. GDP doesn't tell us anything about that. All it tells us is whether the pie got bigger and, therefore, whether the GRiFTers have been making money. At best, if GDP goes up, a few more crumbs might fall from their table.

"Arseholes," muttered George under his breath as he wrestled with a rib.
"And while a rising *GDP* may please the politicians in the short term, in the long run, it tells us we're using more resources to keep the dragon fed, and, by that logic, it more or less tells us how much sooner we'll be killing ourselves!"
"Fuck," said George quietly, now distractedly attacking a prawn.
"So, why do we put *GDP* on a pedestal when we know all this?" asked the Director rhetorically.
"Beats me," replied George, wiping the corners of his mouth with his napkin.

5.2. Mo Money Mo Problems

"If *GDP* is such a poor measure of success, what do you suggest we use instead?" asked George, now sufficiently replenished to concentrate again. Looking at the plate of food he'd just devoured, he had an idea. "How about we use the number of *McDonald's* I eat per year or something?"
George thought he was being casually flippant, but the Director seized upon this comment to make his next point.
"Funny you should say that," replied the Director, "*The Economist* magazine uses something called the *Big Mac Index* [28] to compare the value of different currencies around the world. If you love *Big Macs*, it seems obvious that you'd be happier living in a country where they are relatively cheap. But true happiness is more than just eating Big Macs. I mean, even if *Big Macs* were incredibly cheap, there's only so many of them you'd want to eat before you feel sick."
"I'm not so sure about that," advised George earnestly, "I can eat an enormous number of Big Macs before feeling sick."

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[28] **The Big Mac Index** was invented by The Economist in 1986 as a lighthearted guide to whether currencies are at their "correct" level. The basic idea is that a Big Mac should be roughly the same price in different countries. If the price is higher in one country compared to another, it suggests that the currency may be overvalued. **https://www.investopedia.com**

The Director tried to avoid dwelling on this image.
"What I'm saying, George, is that if you had all the money in the world and you could buy anything you desired, it doesn't necessarily follow that you'd be any happier. There's much more to happiness than simply satisfying our superficial desires."
"I know plenty of people who are filthy rich yet as miserable as hell," confirmed George. "I should know. I'm one of them."
"Me too," admitted the Director reflectively. "Most people assume that if they could only buy that new house or car, they'd finally be happy. So they save and eventually own whatever they'd been craving, only to discover that, after a couple of weeks, they are miserable all over again. I hate to break it to you, George, but you *can't buy happiness*."
"I know all about that too," replied George, ruefully. "I think Steve Jobs said something along the lines of *Being the richest man in the cemetery doesn't matter to me… Going to bed at night saying we've done something wonderful, that's what matters* [29]. But it's different if you don't have food to eat or a roof over your head."
"You're right," the Director agreed. "Everyone deserves enough food and a safe place to live. That should be a basic requirement of a well-functioning society. But I'm talking about all these people who can afford all the food they need and are still unhappy."
"Did you know," asked the Director playfully, "that there's a limit to how much money you need?"
"No, I did not know that," replied George, his interest piqued. "Tell me more."

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[29] **Steve Jobs's Philosophy of Life** **https://theobjectivestandard.com**

"Well," explained the Director, "they conducted some research a few years back and discovered something they called the *Easterlin Paradox* [30]. They gathered a ton of lifestyle and spending data and, after extensive analysis, concluded that when you first start earning money, you feel an initial boost of happiness. But then, as you grow richer, the enjoyment begins to wear off; after you reach a certain level of wealth, it no longer matters how much money you have; you ain't getting any happier. Sure, lots of scientists questioned these findings, but they ring true and make sense to me."

"Same here," confirmed George. "The happiest time of my life was when I parked cars at the *Desperate and Divorced* nightclub on Sunset Strip. I got plenty of tips and occasionally slept with a starlet, and I didn't have a care in the world. Now, I spend months living in hotels, drinking too much *Jack* and trying to avoid selfie-hunters."

"Me too," agreed the Director again. "Then there's other research that backs this up, where a different study looked at 450,000 Americans and found that higher incomes made people feel successful, but this didn't necessarily make them feel any happier. I guess these rich folk just sit in their big houses, knowing people think they're successful when, inside, they still feel empty and disappointed. Wasn't being rich supposed to be more fun than this?"

"I tick that box too!" confirmed George matter-of-factly, now sucking the last of the meat from his greasy ribs.

"I reckon the problem starts with all the advertising we watch," speculated the Director. "It pumps our heads with ideas until we become so obsessed with owning the latest *iPhone 10* that we can't do anything rational until we've got one. Then, once we've finally handed over the cash and bought it, *Apple*

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[30] **What is the Easterlin Paradox?** In his essay "*Does Economic Growth Improve the Human Lot? Some Empirical Evidence",* Prof. Easterlin of SoCal University concluded that the increase in a country's standard of living was not connected to its level of happiness. These finding have been challenged (esp. by Betsey Stevenson & Justin Wolfers) However, in follow—up research in 2017 Easterlin reaffirmed that "long—term trends in growth rates of happiness and real GDP per capita are not significantly positively related." **www.intelligenteconomist.com**

launches the *iPhone 11 Max Pro*, or whatever, and we start the craving all over again. We're like hamsters running on a wheel, chasing a carrot, or whatever hamsters eat, which I find sad. Intelligent humans ought to be smarter than hamsters, but there you are… "

George was now thinking about his niece's hamsters.

"When I look back at my advertising career, I spent most of my time trying to convince people they'd be respected more if they bought a newer *Audi* or the latest pair of *Nikes*. I was programming them to feel bad about themselves. I was part of the *hegemony*."

"OK, but let's not go there again," interjected George. "You didn't do anything wrong."

"Well, I did," replied the Director, "but, as you say, let's not go there just yet. I'll talk more about that later on."

This foreshadowing sounded ominous to George.

"... In fact, research has found that happier people tend to spend their money on *experiences* rather material possessions. Happy people also allocate more *quality time* to be with the people they love, and, most of all, they set aside time to help others — and animals, of course. The quickest way for me to feel happy is to hang out with my dog. So, overall, the science suggests *it's not how much money you have, but what you do with it that counts*."

'You're probably right," said George, a little despondently. "I used to have a lovely black lab called Molly, but I was forced to give her up when I started working on location so much."

"On the other hand," continued the Director, "money can also make you miserable. Deep down, most people simply crave money to impress their neighbours, and if that's the case, the problem is probably more to do with a lack of self-worth than a lack of funds.

"The aspect of the research I liked the most was simply realising that money can't buy you happiness, can be a source of happiness in itself! Isn't that

great?! Knowing that money doesn't make you happy can actually make you happy!"
"Now that's what I call a *win-win*!" chuckled George.
"It *IS* a *win-win*," confirmed the Director with a note of triumph, "and that's what the *GRiFTers* are terrified of us finding out. Because if we all woke up one day and realised that simply buying stuff didn't make us happy, the world of the *GRiFTer* economy would grind to a halt."
This was really beginning to make George reassess his life and, especially all the expensive *stuff* cluttering up his home back in LA, which he couldn't say he used much nor particularly liked.
"If we stopped this obsession with buying things and started enjoying ourselves instead, the *GRiFTers* would find themselves out of a job and looking for something else to do with their sorry lives - beyond siphoning off their ill-gotten gains into tax havens. And, best of all, they'd have to mingle with the *hoi polloi,* who don't judge a person's worth by the size of their car. They'd hate it!"
The Director chuckled to himself at the thought.

5.3 Can't Buy Me Love

"However, to return to your question, George, about what we can use instead of *GDP*, well, you might think there are no alternatives as we hear so little about them. In reality, though, there are plenty of options out there."
"Really?" queried George.
"Of course! I know of at least three, and there are probably a lot more besides, but we don't hear much about them because our governments are so fixated on *GDP*. But I'm here to say that *GDP* is a simplistic and harmful measure. Back in 1776, Adam Smith would have loved the idea of *GDP* because it is clear and simple, but just like the rest of Adam Smith's ideas, it doesn't hold up in

2024. As John Maynard Keynes said — *When the facts change, we change our minds*, eh George?"

"We change our minds," echoed George.

"*GDP* is the central plank of right-wing capitalist thinking, which starts and ends with financial growth. Looking at it another way, it's just a measure of the rich getting richer."

"So what else is on the menu?" asked George.

The Director was unsure if George was asking about alternative economic models or the selection of sweets on the elaborate menu he was inspecting, but hoped it was the former.

"Well, the first is the *Human Development Index* — or *HDI* [31], to its friends, which, unlike GDP, considers factors like health, education, housing, and overall living standards. That makes sense, right? After all, isn't the goal of a society to improve the quality of life for its citizens? Especially because, as I say, GDP offers no guarantee of wealth being distributed or spent on things that a society needs to function properly. Call me cynical, but it almost seems as if those countries that are most obsessed with GDP are also the ones that are least concerned with the welfare of their poor. What say you, George?"

"I say, let's start with a *Chocolate Bombe,*" was George's considered response.

"The United Nations introduced the *HDI* in 1990 as an alternative to GDP for exactly these reasons, and, interestingly, it was the Nordic countries—Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Iceland—who took it most seriously. Not unsurprisingly, they were soon the best-performing countries when measured using *HDI*. New Zealand also performed well. It was no coincidence that they all kept electing socialist governments committed to

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[31] **The Human Development Index (HDI)** provides a comparative measure of human development across countries, allowing policymakers to assess progress, identify areas for improvement, and prioritise policies. Its criteria are: Life Expectancy at Birth, Years of Education and Gross National Income (GNI) per Capita. **https://hdr.undp.org**

strong welfare systems, universal education, healthcare, and social security, just like Attlee's Welfare State, all funded through progressive taxation.

"And it isn't just rich countries that score well on the *HDI.* Uruguay and Costa Rica have happier-than-average citizens, too."

"Wait a second," George interrupted. "Are you saying we'd all be happier if we were just a little more socialist? Is that it? Is that's your big idea? Not exactly the groundbreaking shake-up I was expecting."

"Hold your horses, that's not what I'm saying," replied the Director, mildly affronted. "My point is simply that societies tend to be happier when wealth is distributed more evenly. Conversely, a government overly focused on boosting GDP scores lower on the HDI. It's not exactly rocket science."

"Oh, I see," George acknowledged, stepping down from his lofty position and returning to his *Bombé*. "Please continue."

"So, let me tell you about the other two measures, if you're still interested, that is?" said the Director in mock sarcasm.

"Please do," replied George, now looking as though he might lick the last of the chocolate sauce from his dish.

"There's another measure, similar to the *HDI*, called the *Genuine Progress Indicator* (*GPI*) [32], which was developed in the late 1980s when policymakers began to notice that *GDP* wasn't actually measuring well-being or quality of life. To address this, the *GPI* also considers distribution of income, the value of leisure time and the cost of pollution on the environment."

"Sounds better," agreed George.

"And the most exciting thing about *GPI* was that, by looking at it side by side with *GDP*, there was obviously very little correlation between the two. In fact, when you compare the two measures over the last 100 years, GDP has

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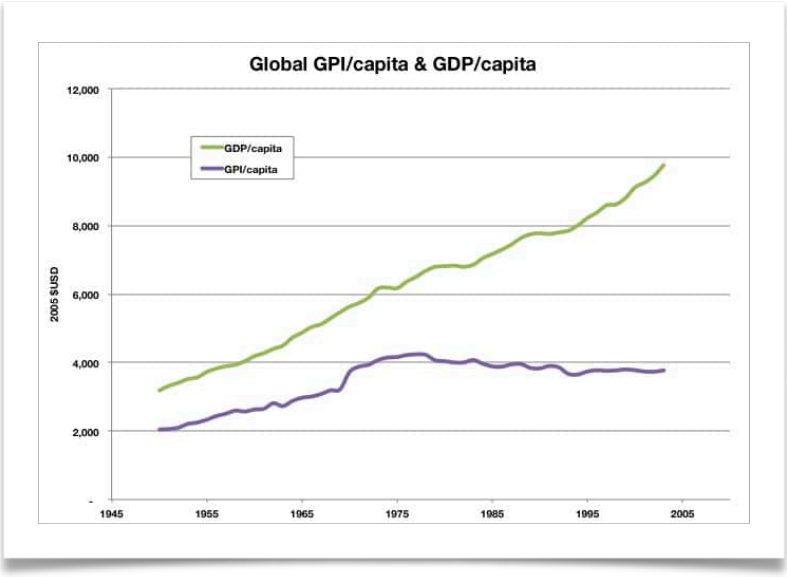
[32] **The Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI)** — Unlike GDP, GPI takes into account a broader range of economic, social, and environmental factors to assess a society's well—being and sustainability. **Differences Between GDP and GPI** **www.differencebetween.net**

generally increased, while the *Genuine Progress Indicator* has either flatlined or declined!"

At this point, the Director pulled out his pencil again and began to scribble on the back of the wine menu, eventually describing a rough chart like this:



"So what does that tell us, George?"

George was a little surprised to be put on the spot like this, so he looked at the graph and hoped a shrug of the shoulders would suffice.

"It irrefutably tells you that, by this measure, the *Invisible Hand* is more focused on patting the rich on the back than lifting the poor out of poverty. It also clearly demonstrates that *trickle-down* economics needs more than wishful thinking and gravity before the wealthy can be persuaded to part with their fortunes and close down their offshore tax havens. Above all, it proves one thing: GDP is utter bullshit, George. UTTER BULLSHIT!"

Yelling BULLSHIT! in a restaurant had made George look up to see if the other guests had been offended. The Director was unconcerned and continued, oblivious.

"But what difference has any of this analysis made?" he asked. "What do you suppose we've done to correct the obvious weakness in using *GDP* as a universal economic measure of success?"

"I'm guessing not much?" proffered George hopefully.

"You're damned right," replied the Director. "Not much. In fact, absolutely zero, zilch, nada... bugger all… Sweet F.A… Turns out *GDP*, which politicians spend their entire careers chasing, bears little relationship to the quality of life a society provides. In fact, in many ways it is meaningless. I mean, if trickle-down economics actually worked, we'd all enjoy fantastic public services like transport and healthcare, and working people wouldn't be homeless or be relying on food banks. But it doesn't do any of that. It just tells us how much money the rich are making. Turns out, a rising tide doesn't lift all boats."

"Just the luxury yachts. Who knew?" George added dryly.

"And when you factor in that this economic model is steadily wrecking the planet, it's hard not to conclude that GDP as a perfect measure of our collective insanity. Far from benefitting society as a whole, a rising GDP just means that more wealth will disappear into those offshore tax havens, to the benefit of literally no one. If you ask me, that's criminal. The politicians can take their sacred GDP and shove it." [33]

"Blimey!" was all George could think to say. However, he did say it in the Northern English accent he'd been using for the past few months, so it made the Director chuckle and helped defuse an otherwise tense moment.

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[33] **Solving the Climate Crisis Requires the End of Capitalism.** It's time to face the fact that resolving the climate crisis will require a fundamental shift away from our growth—based, corporate—dominated global system. **www.resilience.org**

Realising he needed to lighten up, the Director sighed deeply, took up his spoon, and tucked into his *Deconstructed Rhubarb and Custard Compote Fusion.* "But, I have to say my favourite *GDP* alternative isn't *HDI* or even the *GPI*, but something they use in Bhutan called the *Gross National Happiness Index* [34], which looks even more deeply into what makes people happy."

"Bhutan?" asked George, looking up from his dish for a moment, chocolate all around his mouth.

"Yes, it's a small country in the Himalayas. I went there last year scouting locations for my next film about *Trust*. A wonderful place. Very spiritual but also very, very happy. Part of me wanted to stay, but I felt an urge to get back to the UK to make the Dragon movie. You can't hide from the climate crisis, even in Bhutan."

The Director slurped custard from his spoon before continuing.

"Back in the 1970s, the King of Bhutan wanted a way to measure his country's progress. As a devoted Buddhist, he already understood that material wealth didn't guarantee happiness and that GDP was nothing more than a distraction —a mirage, a fallacy, completely out of touch with reality. So he sought a different way to track his people's inner well-being and after much thought and meditation, he settled on 33 benchmarks, covering everything from spiritual fulfilment and cultural enrichment to ecological diversity and, of course, basic living standards. And you might say that's fine for a tiny mountainous state in the middle of nowhere, but could it work in the UK or USA?"

"That's fine for a tiny mountainous state in the middle of nowhere, but could it work in the UK or USA?" parroted George, in a banal moment of amusement.

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[34] The concept of **'Gross National Happiness'** was first developed by the 4th King of Bhutan, King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, in the late 1970s when he stated, "Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross Domestic Product." **https://ophi.org.uk**

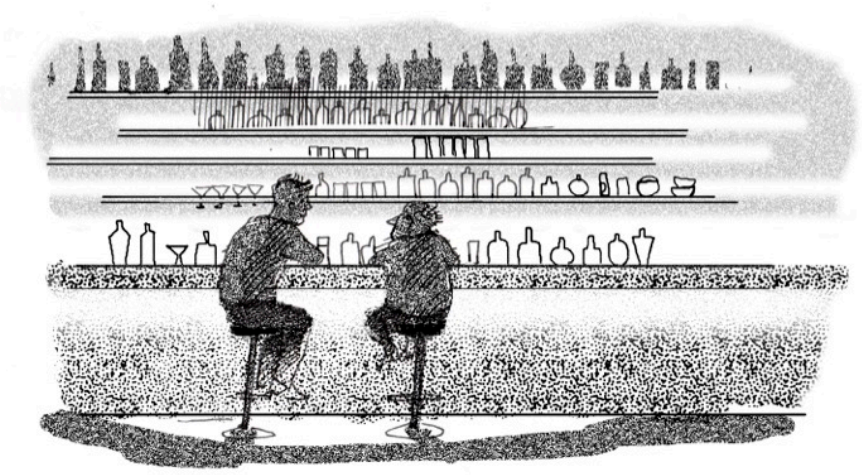
"Well, that's a fair point," the Director replied, refusing to engage in the silliness. "But what I admire about the King of Bhutan is how he brought something almost spiritual into his happiness index. He understood that life isn't just about money—or even just about equality and living standards. He knew that how we feel inside matters just as much as any of those tangible measures, and I completely agree. It reminds me of a study on age and happiness—turns out, older people are happier than those in middle age because they've realised life isn't worth stressing over. At some point, you just sit back and enjoy the ride."

"A good sweet trolley would be one of my criteria," added George drolly.

"Good point," agreed the Director. "But stick with me here because I'm getting close to giving you the answer you want. "

"Are you going to eat that last profiterole?" asked George, still somewhat distracted by the food.

6: The Nightcap Pt.1 – CH–CH–CH–CH–CHANGES...



6.1. We Kill The Sacred Cow* Tonight, So Stick Around (*neoliberal capitalism)

The Director and George had drawn out their late-night meal for as long as they possibly could, and by the time they'd worked their way through the cheese board, dessert wine and brandy to finish off that initial *amuse-bouche* they'd wolfed down an hour-and-a-half earlier, seemed a long time and many, many calories ago. They were the last guests in the restaurant by some margin, and the *maître'd,* the servers and even the *chef* had gathered in the corner, waiting for their celebrity guests to leave.

"I think we may have overstayed our welcome," whispered the Director, motioning to the staff. "I've said enough anyway."

This didn't help George. He had invested a lot of brain cells in this personal symposium and had listened as intently as he could to the Director's critique of a flawed capitalist system. So now he needed more specific, practical guidance on what to do about it.

"You can't leave me hanging!" he said urgently. He was tired and woozy, but he still needed to know how the final piece of this jigsaw would fit. "I get it; we need a new approach, but what? This happens all the time. People say we've got to do *something*, but then never explain what that *something* is. So are you going to let me down as well?"

The Director was impressed by George's dogged persistence.

"Tell you what," he replied, "why don't we retire to the bar for a nightcap? I can outline a few of my proposed solutions, and then, if I've answered your questions, I can order a cab and get home to my poor wife."

"Sounds good!" said George, removing his napkin, helping the Director to his feet and steering them both to the bar. Once settled on barstools, the Director continued:

George, we've talked about how capitalism isn't what it seems, but also that it isn't a grand conspiracy created by an elite group of puppet masters either. Sure, the GRiFTers have been riding that gravy train for the last two hundred years, but you can't blame them for that.

"A GRiFTer's gonna do what a GRiFTer's gonna do," said George mock-philosophically.

"You're right, but we can only move on if we accept that most of us would do exactly the same if we were in their shoes. So let’s put them to one side; otherwise, it just becomes a blame game."

This was a challenging idea, because George had become increasingly irritated by the thought of a rich and selfish elite screwing up the planet for their own short-term gain. But George was trying to comply with the

Director's wishes, so he continued to listen, knowing there was a grain of truth in what he'd just said, even if he didn't want to admit it.

Seeing that George had accepted his invitation, the Director continued: "Tolstoy observed *Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself* [1]. It's hard to accept, but we're *all* somewhat complicit in this capitalist pyramid scheme, and we won't be able to fix anything until we're willing to own up to it. And that's the point I was trying to make in the film," concluded the Director. "We can end this crisis right now if we all just stopped being so bloody selfish. It really *is* that simple!"

"Harsh, but I guess the truth hurts," said George.

"Don't get me wrong; I'm not blaming anyone," replied the Director matter-of-factly. "But we need a sort of *Truth and Reconciliation* [2] session before we can start to work together and put things right. That big bad dragon will only thrive if we feed it, so we need to realise that we feed it when we feed our *own* greed and selfishness. Stop feeding the personal dragon inside us and we stop feeding the capitalist dragon that's destroying the planet."

"I've got a personal dragon inside me?" asked the bartender light-heartedly, overhearing her new guests' animated discussion.

"You'd better believe it," confirmed George excitedly. "Just like the one in *Alien,* and if we don't kill it quickly, it will burst out of our chest cavities and kill us all! Except maybe Sigourney Weaver and the cat."

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[1] **Leo Tolstoy** from "Three Methods Of Reform" (1900). The full quote reads: "There can be only one permanent revolution — a moral one; the regeneration of the inner man. How is this revolution to take place? Nobody knows, but every man feels it clearly in himself. And yet in our world everybody thinks of changing humanity, and nobody thinks of changing himself." **https://booksonthewall.com**

[2] **A Truth and Reconciliation Commission** (TRC) is typically established after periods of conflict or authoritarian rule, with the primary objective of facilitating healing and reconciliation. For example, the South African **Truth and Reconciliation Commission** was a court assembled in 1996 after the end of apartheid. **https://en.wikipedia.org**

"Really?" blurted the bartender in surprised amusement. This was not the conversation she'd been expecting.

"I'm afraid so, and since we don't like admitting we're all selfish, greedy bastards, we blame the big bad capitalist Dragon instead," George went on.

The Director was concerned that George's increasingly warped version of the conversation, so he decided to step in.

"Maybe think of it more as *Willy Wonka,*" said the Director, looking for a friendlier movie reference. "What would the world look like if we all stopped being greedy, selfish *Augustus Gloop* [3] and started being kind and considerate *Charlie Bucket?* If we did that, maybe we could change the world."

'Wow…' said the bartender quietly to herself, wondering what she'd walked into. Meanwhile, as she waited for an appropriate moment to take their order, she recognised that one was that *schlocky* movie actor and the other was an elder statesman of British cinema. Still, she'd served many famous faces in this bar, so wasn't about to feel star-struck. In any case, these two particular celebrities had clearly had quite a lot to drink already, to say the least, and, as such, seemed less daunting and aloof.

"But, of course, it isn't that easy," continued the Director, adding a hint of caution to his analogy. "If it were, we'd have slain this Dragon years ago."

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[3] **Augustus Gloop** is a character in Roald Dahl's children's book ***Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*** (1964). He is an extremely greedy child who is obsessed with food and never stopped eating.

Alright, we're back to dragons, thought the bartender, while keeping her counsel. She was confident she'd understand the gist of this conversation once she'd eavesdropped a little more on their banter.

"What's been missing is a willingness to walk away from a system that has served us pretty well up to now," explained the Director, addressing the young bartender directly. "I mean, so long as you're a white, middle-class man born in a *developed* country, why rock the boat?"

The bartender offered a face that said, *I hear you.*

"Of course, fewer and fewer people think capitalism is perfect. I mean, anyone with an iota of a conscience can see the world is unfair and that the rich countries are exploiting the poor. But hey, *out of sight, out of mind,* eh*?*" asked the Director, with a resigned shrug.

The bartender looked at George to see assess his views. George nodded back in agreement, so the bartender nodded too.

"And the *GRiFTers* are always on hand to salve our conscience, by insisting there's no alternative, so why bother looking behind the curtain?" said the Director, assuming this would make perfect sense to a total stranger.

"Why indeed?" agreed the bartender, vaguely wondering what a *GRiFTer* might be. However, she'd also seen this as her chance to ask, "So, what can I get you, gentlemen, on this damp autumn evening?"

"I'd take a large 12-year-old *Glenlivet*, and my friend here will have … ?"

"… a *Jack and Coke,* please," requested George, predictably.

As she walked away to prepare their drinks, the Director looked to George to see if he'd make a 'pass' at this attractive bartender; a little test he often deployed to test the character of his leading men. Would George use his fame and fortune to take advantage of the women he met? He needn't have worried. George's gormless expression suggested that his mind was elsewhere, and from the look of it, he was still grappling with the fundamental issues raised

by their conversation. That, or he was passing gas. George was no sleazeball, which the Director found endearing.

In this lull in proceedings, the Director further contemplated George's rather bland profile. The actor appeared somewhat distracted as he tried to fish the last olive from the complimentary bowl in front of him. Perhaps he had been inundated by the tsunami of information that had engulfed him over the past five hours, or maybe he just *really* wanted that last olive. The Director couldn't tell, but he knew there were a few essential plot points he still needed to explain before he could give George the answers he'd been demanding all night. And then, when that was finally done, they might all go home to bed.

For starters, the Director needed to explain why it was so much easier to tempt humans to be selfish than to encourage them to be generous. He also had to present an alternative vision for humanity that was truly *sustainable*. So, the Director mentally planned a route for delivering this message in what was left of the evening.

6.2. Everybody Wants To Rule The World

"George, do you remember our earlier conversation about *Monopoly*?"

"I do," George confirmed, noting it now felt like a lifetime ago.

"And what about the part about *Rent Extraction*?"

"Do you mean to the part about the bridge and the hospital?"

"Exactly," replied the Director. "But I'm not sure I asked whether you play *Monopoly* yourself?"

"I do, absolutely," George responded fondly. "When my family gets together at Christmas, we play in an intense game that lasts the entire day. It's a sort of tradition, but why do you want to know?"

"Well, you might not know this, but there was an earlier version of *Monopoly* called *The Landlord's Game?"* [4]

"I did *not* know that," replied George, his curiosity piqued.

"An American named Lizzie Magie designed it around 1900. She was something of a socialist who invented the game to demonstrate the evils of *actual* monopolies in the real world. In fact, she devised two ways of playing. The first was the *Monopoly* version, like the game we play today, where the objective is to bankrupt your opponents. The other version was called *Prosperity,* where you worked together to make sure everyone wins. It became a craze among *Harvard* students and the *Quaker* community, but the interesting thing is that, after a while, *Monopoly* became the far more popular version, to the point that no one now remembers *Prosperity* today. It's as if it never existed. And, it's my guess that's because it's much more fun grinding your opponents into the dust than giving them a helping hand."

"Interesting, but what's your point?" asked George.

"My point is that it's more fun to be selfish than to cooperate and it's a good example of the greedy dragon inside us," continued the Director, "Another good example is a book called *The Fable of the Bees: or, Private Vices, Public Benefits* [5], written by a Dutchman called Bernard Mandeville who was living in London around 1705. The central idea of his book was that while being *greedy, promiscuous and selfish* might be morally questionable, they inadvertently built a more prosperous society, which is a concept that predated

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[4] **Monopoly** was patented in 1904, with the aim of promoting the economic theories specifically about land taxation and economic justice.
The secret history of Monopoly: the capitalist board game's leftwing origins.
www.theguardian.com

[5] **"The Fable of the Bees: or, Private Vices, Public Benefits"** by Bernard Mandeville, (1714) uses the metaphor of a beehive to suggest that the pursuit of personal pleasure and material gain leads to economic growth and social progress. Mandeville's ideas were controversial and sparked debates about morality, economics, and the role of government in regulating human behaviour.
http://scihi.org

Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* by almost 50 years. Even so, the London *elite,* who, at the time, saw themselves as God-fearing pillars of the community, weren't too pleased to be told they were actually a bunch of greedy, selfish bastards, so the book was ignored."

"So what's new?" asked George acerbically. "This *Mandible* guy was only telling them that *Greed is Good,* which is what Gordon Gekko was shouting about in *Wall Street."*

"Fifty years later, Adam Smith said the same thing, but had the good sense to wrap it up in academic respectability, and this time, those same greedy dragons lapped it up!"

"Smith was more or less telling them it was OK to be selfish." Confirmed George. "He was pushing against an open door!"

"Exactly," agreed the Director. "Smith gave *The Establishment* a fig leaf to hide their greedy, selfish behaviour behind. In fact, he told them that, by being greedy and selfish, they were actually doing everyone else a huge favour!"

"Talk about *having your cake and eating it!* - That's what I call a win-win!" exclaimed George, now a little lightheaded from the sugar rush brought on by his excessive dessert consumption."And they've been stuffing their greedy little pie-holes ever since."

"That's right," agreed the Director, delighted to see George getting on board with this idea so enthusiastically. "And the point I'm making is that while we all have a latent streak of selfishness, especially when society encourages us to be selfish, it doesn't mean we're *obliged* to be selfish. And when we then start to realise that our selfishness will wind up killing us, we can perhaps begin to think about being more considerate to others. Adam Smith claimed that greed was a law of nature, but that's rubbish; it's just a choice we make."

At that moment, the bartender intervened. "Here you go, gentlemen: One large *Glenlivet* and one *Jack and Coke*"

Without trying to make it look too obvious, she took her time arranging the little paper coasters to hear more of what the two thespians were discussing. The Director didn't mind. He was happy for anyone to eavesdrop on his views on this subject. To him, this conversation was a matter of life and death, and the larger the audience, the better.

I am trying to remember if I've mentioned this before, George, but it's my theory that Adam Smith was simply in the right place at the right time. However, that doesn't mean his ideas were more 'right' than any other theories circulating at the time. In fact, things might have turned out very differently if we'd all listened to another Adam.

George attempted to contrive the *intrigued* expression he reserved for that scene in a movie where he was being told *significant information* essential to the plot.

"Take Adam Ferguson, for example, who was a good friend of Adam Smith."

"OK," said George, trying to concentrate.

"Nine years before Smith published *The Wealth of Nations*, Ferguson wrote his book, An Essay on the History of Civil Society , arguing that societies function better when built on cooperation and strong social bonds. He warned that a capitalist society, focused on money, could make people weak, dishonourable, and selfish. Unsurprisingly, this wasn't a viewpoint that thrilled the, ahem, (checks notes) Capitalist Elite—so it didn't exactly catch on."

"Quelle surprise!" said George in a sarcastic Californian/French accent.

"But imagine if Ferguson's book had been the bestseller, and *The Wealth of Nations* had ended up in the remaindered bin—we might all be living in a very different, better place," said the Director, a little wistfully.

"I guess them's the breaks," the bartender said, no longer pretending she hadn't been listening.

"Them's the breaks, indeed," the Director agreed, raising his glass to her.

"I get it. I'm a greedy son-of-a-bitch, only interested in myself," said George, responding to the Director's claim that most people are more than happy to be selfish if given half the chance, and maybe the world *would* be better if we were all just a bit nicer to each other. But hey—I've done pretty well out of the evils of capitalism. I mean, look at me!"

The Director raised an eyebrow. "Congratulations. You've successfully monetised your lack of a moral compass."

"I prefer to call it *strategic self-interest*," George replied, still smiling.

"Of course you do," the Director said dryly, lifting his glass again. "So does every oligarch, arms dealer, and lobbyist willing to ignore their conscience."

George chuckled, unfazed. "Well, I'm not saying it's perfect. I'm just saying it works."

"You make a good point," the Director admitted. The bartender nodded too, curious to hear how he'd respond to such a reasonable challenge.

"This is exactly the question we need to answer if we want people to sign up for our project. So I think it's time I told you how we can change direction," the Director concluded with his own flourish.

"Hallelujah!" declared George, throwing both arms in the air and clapping loudly.

6.3. Do You Realise...

At this point, the Director—clearly a little drunk—motioned for George and the bartender to lean in closer.

"But first, I have a confession to make."

"What's that?" asked George, a little concerned about what was coming.

"I've been a very naughty boy, and I'm ashamed of what I've done," the Director whispered conspiratorially. The bartender braced herself.

"I wasn't always an Oscar-nominated director, you know....I used to be in advertising."
He paused, as if expecting gasps, but instead got silence.
Then George chuckled...
"Ha! Is that all? You've told me this already! I thought you were about to say you'd been arrested for exposing yourself to the Women's Institute or something."
"No, nothing so exciting, I'm afraid. But back in the '80s, I used to film chimpanzees drinking tea. I sold cigarettes. I didn't care—it was good money. Me, Ridley, Parker, Putnam—we were all at it. Straight out of art school and into Soho, making little films, flogging empty dreams to the eager masses."
"There are worse things," said the bartender sympathetically. "My parents were the same. My dad was a *paparazzi*—paid for sneaky snaps of Princess Margaret in her undies. But back in the '70s, no one cared. It was normal."
"But I *should* have cared!" the Director cried, suddenly forlorn. "I'd read *Small Is Beautiful*, so I *knew* I was storing up trouble for future generations. But I figured I'd be dead from the booze or the drugs long before then. And now… here I am, still alive and feeling guilty for my part in the mess.
"Advertising hacks like me reassured the masses that it was okay to be selfish. But now I see—we were just mercenary *Sirens* [6], tempting them to buy plastic promises wrapped in glossy lies." And now we're about to hit the rocks and be crushed under the landfill of pointless shit we created."
"Come on," said George, "you can't blame yourself. Everyone was doing it back then."
"But that's exactly the point," the Director replied. "No one was taking responsibility. It was always someone else's fault—and look where that's got us. It was a dereliction of duty toward future generations.

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[6] In Greek mythology, the **Sirens** were part bird / part woman, whose songs were so mesmerised that sailors would steer their ships towards them and crash against the rocks.

"So the first thing we've got to do now is stop pointing fingers and start taking a long, hard look in the mirror."

The Director, now quite crestfallen, drained his glass.

"Two more of the same, please, barman!" he called, not bothering to adjust his pronoun.

"Well, I think you're being a bit hard on yourself," said George, consolingly. "I remember when I used to love going to Sea World. I was amazed by those orcas doing their amazing tricks every day—looked like they were having a whale of a time, ho ho."(The bartender groaned) "So I couldn't understand how it could possibly be cruel. But over the years, as I learned more about it, I changed my mind. Now I think the dolphin shows should be shut down, and those poor animals need to be properly rehabilitated.

"I guess that's what progress looks like."

"*When the facts change, I change my mind,"* [7] said the bartender reflectively—the conversation now far too compelling for her to leave and fetch their drinks.

"I've been saying that all day!" said the Director. "John Maynard Keynes!"

"He's the man," agreed the bartender, finally heading off to refill their glasses.

"But what happens if we stop buying stuff?" asked George, picking up on the Director's point about advertising. "Won't society grind to a halt?

"I mean, if I owned a little hardware store and people stopped buying my hammers and nails, I'd lose my income, and I wouldn't be able to pay my taxes. And if no one's paying taxes, who will build the hospitals and schools?

"And don't tell me we'll all live in a commune, because I'm not wearing hemp. Too itchy. That's not going to happen."

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[7] **John Maynard Keynes** was known for his pragmatic approach to economics and policy—making. He believed in the importance of adapting his views and policies when presented with new evidence or changing circumstances.

"Ah!" said the Director. "This is what everyone worries about when they start to question what happens if capitalism falls—because all we've ever known *is* a capitalist system, and it's hard even to imagine anything else."

"That may be so," said George, now visibly irritated, "but I put it to you again, sir: What's the fucking answer?"

Noting the shift in tone, the Director looked George in the eye, took a deep breath, and said, "Nobody knows for sure, George. But then again, nobody really understands capitalism either.

"But I *can* promise you: no communes, no hemp. You have my word."

George felt a little placated by this news.

"See, there was never a blueprint for the great capitalist project—it just sort of evolved. Then Adam Smith comes along and declares it's some kind of natural law, and suddenly we all feel justified—even righteous—about getting what we want, no matter the cost to anyone else.

"But now, after three hundred years, it's getting pretty hard to ignore the fact that this so-called 'law of nature' has mutated into something more like that man-eating plant from *Little Shop of Horrors* [8]—only instead of gobbling up a barber's shop, this one's about to eat the whole planet."

George knew the plant in *Little Shop of Horrors* was called *Audrey II*, but he kept that fact to himself—he didn't want to come off as a know-it-all.

Instead, he folded his arms, looked unimpressed, and waited. He still hadn't heard the Director describe a workable alternative, and he was beginning to wonder if one really existed at all.

"So let me get this straight," said the Director, flustered. "You want *me* to spell out an alternative to capitalism—when even the greatest minds can't agree on how capitalism works? If Karl Marx had pitched something as far-fetched and

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[8] **The Little Shop of Horrors** — a cult 1960 horror—comedy film later adapted into a successful off—Broadway musical and then a feature film in 1986, directed by Frank Oz. **www.imdb.com**

fanciful as capitalism, no one would've taken him seriously. So why do I have to meet a higher standard, while capitalism gets a free pass?"

"Because," replied George, testily, "as I've been saying all night, capitalism works just fine from where I'm standing.

"And what's more, I don't need an economics degree to understand it. We're sitting at a fancy bar in Battersea Power Station at one in the morning, and I'm living a *very* comfortable life.

"We just wrapped a movie. I'm flying back to LA in the morning, and on Tuesday, I'll be shooting a spread for Richard Mille. I've got *three* Porsches in my garage. I might take one of them up to Big Sur this weekend, have a cocktail, and watch the sun go down.

"Capitalism might not be perfect, but why should I care? Unless you've got a better alternative, I'm not giving all this up for a fast track to Stalinist Russia."

6.4. Can't Buy Me Love

"OK," said the Director, enjoying this new, feistier version of George, "let me just remind you that this beautiful capitalism you're so keen to defend… is now killing us.

"Second, if it makes you feel any better, I've been working on a new theory. One that doesn't completely trash the current system but offers a more evolved version instead. Something, I think, that could genuinely create a more sustainable planet.

"And if you still insist on keeping your Porsches… that's OK too."

This *did* sound like progress to George, so he beckoned him to continue.

"I haven't quite worked out all the details yet," qualified the Director.

"Get on with it!" shouted George, firmly.

"OK! OK! Well… you might not have noticed, George, but throughout our conversation, I haven't used the phrase *anti-capitalist* once."

This seemed unlikely, given the relentless diatribe he'd endured—but still, George was willing to give the Director the benefit of the doubt, if only to get an answer sometime before Christmas.

"OK, I'm listening," he said, intrigued. "But this had better be good."

"Attaboy!" said the Director briskly. "So, I want us to focus on the idea of *ownership*. Because if you think about it, ownership sits right at the heart of capitalism."

George shrugged, as if to say, *OK, no big deal.*

"Adam Smith believed that owning things was what drove a successful society. If people could earn money and buy stuff they wanted, they'd work harder, which, in theory, made everyone better off."

"Capitalism in a nutshell," said George, matter-of-factly.

"Karl Marx, on the other hand, had different ideas. He believed that owning stuff—especially things like machinery, factories, and land (what he called *the means of production* [9]) corrupted society, and he worried that if you measured success by how much you owned, everything else would become secondary—including the people you share society with."

"Communism in a nutshell," said George. "So, your point?"

"My point is—they were both missing the real issue.

"The answer doesn't lie in owning *or* not owning stuff—but in something that doesn't seem to have occurred to either of them."

"*WHAT?*" George exploded, unable to contain his frustration.

"Something in between…" replied the Director, with a note of intrigue.

George conceded this was, indeed, intriguing, so he bowed his head slightly and said, tentatively, "Go on…"

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[9] In capitalist terms, **the means of production** are privately owned by individuals or corporations who profit from them. **Understanding the Means of Production in Marxism** **https://easysociology.com**

"OK, now we're getting somewhere," said the Director, rubbing his hands together with a hint of glee.

"These days, I don't think many people flick through the *Marxist-Leninist* manifesto and say, 'Yep, that's the society for me.' We've seen how that worked out in Russia and China—both of which have more or less thrown in the towel and allowed private ownership to creep back in."

"OK, but what about Cuba and Vietnam?" challenged the bartender, unwilling to let that sweeping statement slide untested.

"Good question," said the Director, genuinely pleased to have his ideas put to the test.

"Cuba has done remarkably well, all things considered [10], especially given that for over sixty years, they've been systematically undermined by the United States, who've never wanted their system to succeed.

"And yet, their education system is excellent. Nearly every Cuban can read and write. They have universal health care, which is more than you can say for the U.S.

"On the minus side, the Cuban government doesn't allow free elections, so it's hard to know whether the people would *choose* to keep their system if they given the option. But with decades of US propaganda thrown into the mix, any election there would struggle to be truly fair anyway."

"And what about Vietnam?" Faye pressed, not letting the Director off the hook. "I went there on my gap year—it was amazing."

"Alright," said the Director. "I'll admit this isn't exactly my area of expertise, but from what I understand, the Communist Party of Vietnam did a pretty impressive job rebuilding the country after the U.S. finally stopped bombing them in 1976.

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[10] **Cuba's Communist government** has survived decades of US sanctions originally intended to topple its first leader Fidel Castro. It also defied predictions that it would not survive the collapse of the Soviet Union. **www.bbc.co.uk**

"These days, though, it's communist in name only—something you probably noticed when you visited, Faye?" he added, sneaking a glance at her name tag to ensure he'd got her name right.[11]

"And that's the point—you'd be hard-pressed to find a successful country run on strictly communist lines these days. Eventually, they all drift one way or the other, usually ending up as soft socialist economies like Vietnam."

"Or ruthless dictatorships like Russia," George said flatly.

"Or full-blown free-market economies where oligarchs like Bezos and Musk make the rules—or a populist authoritarian freak-show ruled over by a barely sentient *Cheeto* with the IQ of a snow globe," added Faye, unwilling to give the GRiFTers an easy ride.

George snorted into his drink.

"Accepted," said the Director with a shrug.

"So what's the answer?" asked George, eager to skip to the denouement.

"Well," said the Director, pausing theatrically, "after extended reflection on this deeply problematic issue, I've come to the following conclusion…"

"Drum roll, please!" said George, literally drumming on the bar.

"I'm proposing that the idea of ownership isn't bad in itself. Because no matter how much we want to spread the love and be good socialists, we all still need our personal space in which to enjoy our lives—a sense of identity,

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[11] Until 1986 **Vietnam** was once one of the world's poorest and most isolated countries. The Vietnamese government then introduced a series of economic and political reforms aimed at transitioning from a centrally planned to a more market—oriented economy. These changes included liberalising trade, encouraging private enterprise, and attracting foreign investment. Vietnam is now a middle—income country with a dynamic, young population and is an emerging power and an increasingly important U.S. partner. **www.usip.org**

and the freedom to express ourselves in our own unique ways… Not to mention, I look terrible in a Mao suit [12]…"

Faye emphatically nodded in agreement with this sartorial comment.

"People come in all shapes and sizes, and if we took away that chance for individuality, we'd be taking away a big part of what makes us human in the first place."

George very much agreed with this and felt heartened by the sentiment.

"But we also need to be careful," the Director continued, "because with just a little encouragement, it's easy to swing too far the other way—and end up with a society full of self-centred pricks, all hell-bent on getting what they want at the expense of everyone else.

"In other words, a nasty, greedy culture where everyone's out for themselves," suggested George.

"And a climate disaster to boot," added Faye, dryly.

Given everything he'd heard over the past few hours, George understood this was probably a good summary of where the planet now stood.

"So what's the answer, sir?" he asked, now a little more hopeful that one would soon be forthcoming.

The Director paused, held up his hands, and smiled. George wouldn't have been surprised if he'd followed it with a theatrical *Ta-dah!*

"The answer isn't about ownership at all," the Director said at last. "It's about our *relationship* to the things we own."

"I'm not sure I follow," said George, brow furrowed in confusion.

The Director paused. He knew he'd finally arrived at his big reveal—and found himself unexpectedly apprehensive.

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[12] **The Mao Suit,** associated with the Chinese Communist Party has a simple utilitarian design, with a high—necked solar, five front buttons, four packets and straight—legged trousers. During Mao Zedong's leadership, (1943 to 1976) the Mao Suit was standard attire for both men and women in China, reflecting the government's emphasis on simplicity, modesty and collective identity.

He'd never outlined these ideas to anyone before. But he also knew the time had come… It was now or never… So he pressed on.

"If you look up the word *capital* [13] in a dictionary," the Director began, "you'll find it comes from the Latin *caput*, meaning 'head'—as in, the thing that controls the rest of the body."

George nodded. So far, so good.

"In Ancient Rome, the *Capo* referred to the ruling class—those who controlled most of the nation's assets. Over time, their possessions became known as their *capital*. And gradually, *capitalism* came to describe a system built on the pursuit and accumulation of capital… All of which can be traced back to that idea of the head."

"Interesting, but as I asked a moment ago… what's your point?" challenged George.

"My point is this," replied the Director. "If we stopped subscribing to a society driven by our *heads*, and started building one motivated by our *hearts*, we might finally create a world focused on long-term survival rather than short-term gratification."

"That *is* interesting," said George, trying to get his own *caput* around the idea.

The bartender nodded too.

"So I hope you can see my ideas aren't anti-capitalist. I don't think having more money than someone else or owning more stuff is a sin. I'm perfectly OK with you driving a nice car or wearing a fancy watch.

"The problem is this *obsession* with owning more and more and more. I think it's high time we stopped buying crap we *don't* need to satisfy our irrational heads, and started buying more things that genuinely satisfy our hearts.

"And remember, as we discussed earlier, the stuff that satisfies our heads? It's not going to make us happy anyway. We can't buy happiness. That's just the

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[13] **Capital** : **adjective** Of or pertaining to the head — **noun :** Money and possessions, especially a large amount of money used for producing more wealth or for starting a new business:

hegemony talking."

"Whoa," said George, feeling as though the past six hours of mental origami were finally beginning to look like something.

"We have to get clear about something," the Director continued. "There are only two reasons we want to own something. One is because the thing has genuine, intrinsic value—something we can admire. Maybe it's well designed, made from good materials, performs a function, that sort of thing.

"If you've ever read *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* [14] *by Robert Persig*—which I don't suppose you have, because you're probably too young—but if you had, you'd know these things have *quality* [15]."

"The second, and far more common reason we buy things, is to satisfy our need to feel superior. I think we all know that urge."

Somewhat sheepishly, both George and Faye nodded their heads at this.

"But the things we buy to satisfy superficial needs never have *quality*, because *quality* isn't about the object itself but how we live, think, and engage with it. Quality, in this sense, means being conscious of why you are doing something and only choosing to do those things that are valuable and worthy. It's about care. Craftsmanship. Excellence. In everything, from the things we own to the friends we keep.

"So even if something's expensive, that doesn't mean it has *quality*. It usually has *less* intrinsic value, because we're chasing it for the wrong reasons."

"Give me an example," asked Faye, trying to pin the idea to something tangible.

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[14] **Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance** — 1974 is a philosophical autobiographical novel by Robert M Pirsig which describes a motorcycle trip across America's Northwest in the 1960s and examines how we live, and how me might live better. **www.penguin.co.uk**

[15] One of the central themes of the book is the concept of "**Quality**," which Pirsig suggests is a fundamental aspect of existence that transcends traditional definitions and categories but, by using a more holistic and intuitive approach to embracing it will ultimately reveal the nature of reality, and a deeper, more fulfilling and authentic way of life.

"Alright," said the Director. "Look at most of the people you serve here. Many live in Chelsea, rarely drive anywhere, and always take Ubers. But they still own a barely used £100,000 Range Rover.

'Chelsea tractors', added Faye a little dismissively.

"For what?" continued the Director. "They live in a city, so do they need four-wheel drive? The thing guzzles fuel, takes up two parking spaces, and mostly sits outside their house looking imposing. If you live on the tenth floor of Chelsea Harbour, there are very few *legitimate* reasons for owning a Range Rover."

Faye raised a thoughtful eyebrow but didn't interrupt.

"Or the £3,000 Louis Vuitton bag," he continued. "Yes, it's supremely well-crafted and made from the finest materials—but it only holds the same lipstick, mascara and phone you'd find in any other bag. So let's not pretend this is about *function*. That bag is a *billboard* advertising how you'd like to be seen by others.

"In either case, the relationship with the object is *shallow* and *ego-driven*. It's not about the object but what owning that object *means* to others. And *that's* the difference."

"Remember when I said it's not about the thing itself, but your relationship with it? You can see this in everyday life. Some people have lots and lots of friends, and you'd think they were super-popular, but when the chips are down and they need help, those so-called friends are nowhere to be seen."

Both George and Faye nodded solemnly at this thought.

"But then you meet people who don't seem to have many friends at all, yet the friendships they do have are deep and meaningful and last a lifetime. Quality friends. Do you see what I'm getting at?"

George and Faye nodded again, this time in agreement.

"As Pirsig said, quality isn't found in the thing itself—it's in how we engage with it. It's the attention we give, the care we take, the meaning we create. It's

not that a Louis Vuitton bag or a Range Rover can't *have* quality—it's that, for most people, they don't. Because they're not chosen, bought or used with any authentic appreciation of that quality, they're bought to show off. And that's not a good reason to own anything."

At this, George tugged down his shirt sleeve to hide his Richard Mille.

"And that's the kicker: this kind of thing makes up about 90% of the stuff we're tempted to buy. *That's* what drives capitalism—all this stuff we don't need."

George nodded thoughtfully. He understood all of this because it perfectly reflected his own life.

"So, if we can just learn to distinguish between these two categories and only buy the things that have *quality*, we'll soon fix this capitalist problem *and* the environmental crisis at the same time."

"O-kay…" said Faye slowly, still trying to decide whether this idea was brilliant or slightly underwhelming.

"Can you give me a real-world example that shows how this affects the environment?"

"Certainly," said the Director, nodding. "Take fast fashion [16] — Why do we buy cheap clothes made in sweatshops, knowing they'll fall apart after a few months and end up in a landfill? Owning them doesn't make us happy for long, and they're a disaster for the planet—so why do we keep doing it?"

Now it was Faye's turn to feel a little embarrassed.

"Before we buy anything, we should stop and ask: *Why do I want this?* Then remind ourselves it makes more sense to buy fewer clothes that are better

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[16] **Fast fashion** is an approach adopted by retailers such as Zara, H&M and Primark characterised by a rapid turnover of new fashion trends and low—cost manufacturing, moving product quickly from the runway to mass production to disposal once the trend has passed. Fast fashion has been criticised for its negative social and environmental impacts including exploitative labour practices, environmental pollution and the promotion of disposable, throwaway fashion culture.
What is fast fashion, and why is it so controversial? https://edition.cnn.com

made, more ethical and longer-lasting. Things that feel good to wear and mean something to us."

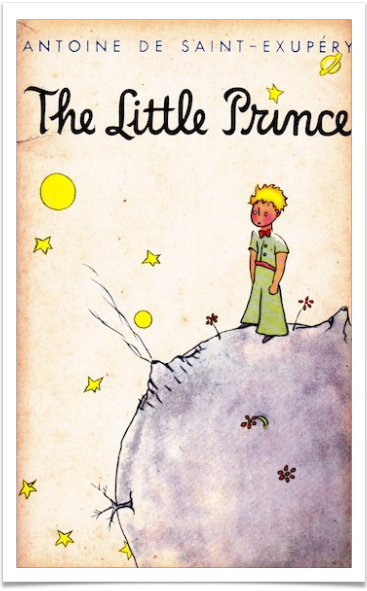
"I get it," said Faye, momentarily thinking of her favourite jacket—the one that made her feel more like her *best self* when she put it on.

"I was thinking of maybe calling this form of ownership... *COPitalism*," the Director added, almost shyly.

"COPitalism?" repeated George, wondering if he'd heard right.

"COPitalism," confirmed the Director. "If capitalism is a system driven by the *head*, then COPitalism suggests one guided by the *heart*. A system where our heart *curates* our choices, where we buy less, but buy better."

"Wow," was all George could think of to say, his fingers flicking open beside his temples in a mock explosion. "Just like *The Little Prince*."



"Pardon?" asked the Director. He knew the book George was referring to, but had never gotten around to reading it.

"You know: *'And now here is my secret, a very simple secret: It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.'"*

George hoped that he had adequately explained the connection he'd just made.

The Director looked at him for a moment and suddenly noticed that George did, in fact, look a little like the kind and sensitive Little Prince [17].

[17] **The Little Prince** (1943) written and illustrated by French writer and pilot Antoine de Saint—Exupéry, tells the tale of an innocent young prince who travels from planet to planet, encountering strange characters. It is an allegory which invites readers to reflect on the beauty and fragility of existence and to cherish the simple joys in life with a childlike wonder.
The Little Prince — Themes and Analysis **https://bookanalysis.com**

6.5 With A Little Help From My Friends

"All of this sounds great," said Faye, still feeling a little tentative, "but I hope you don't mind me saying—it all still feels a bit... pie in the sky. I mean, what are you going to do? Pass a law saying people can only buy things they *love*? Who's supposed to decide whether they bought it out of love or just vanity?"

"A perfectly reasonable question," said the Director, not at all fazed by the fact that the hotel bartender now seemed to have fully crossed the line from staff to fellow conspirator. "Up for hearing my plan for the *COPitalism* revolution?"

Now running on fumes, George wasn't sure he was up for anything, but he also didn't want to say no, so he waved a weary hand. "OK. Let's have it."

Encouraged, the Director pressed on.

"So, while I'm aware that challenging Adam Smith's sacred ideas might seem a little... presumptuous—given he *was* a genius, and I'm just a raddled old adman—Nonetheless, I think he got it wrong."

(Here, the Director stole another glance at the bartender's name tag.)

"You see… Faye… Smith believed his *Invisible Hand* proved that society works best when everyone acts selfishly. But I don't buy it. Actually, I think the Invisible Hand is just as well-suited, if not *more* suited, to spreading a positive message. So I say we reclaim his precious Invisible Hand —and have it wave a flag for *COPitalism* instead."

"More of an Invisible Cheerleader, then?" suggested George sardonically.

"If you like," said the Director, amused by the image of Adam Smith shaking two oversized pom-poms. "But it's no more fanciful than *his* version of the Invisible Hand!"

"I'm sorry," said George, aware his joke might have punctured the Director's pride.

"That's OK," the Director replied, aware that what he was about to say required a degree of blind faith. "But I hope you can see, I'm using the very same argument proposed in *The Wealth of Nations* to support my own theory… just with an ironic twist.

"Because if I'm right, *COPitalism*—or something like it—will be adopted by a more enlightened generation that's coming after us."

"Why?" asked Faye sharply, not letting the Director get away with any loose thinking.

"Why? Because, according to the logic of the *Invisible Hand*, it will suit their long-term goals to be less selfish and more cooperative with each other."

"Interesting," mused Faye, thoughtfully swirling an ice cube around her glass.

Relieved that his audience hadn't burst out laughing, the Director pressed on with renewed enthusiasm.

"You see, as I explained to George earlier, Adam Smith believed an Invisible Hand was quietly working behind the scenes to generate wealth for everyone.

The only problem was that he couldn't explain *how* or *why* it did this. Which must've been a little awkward, given that he was a card-carrying member of the *Enlightenment* boy band, alongside Voltaire, Kant, and Isaac Newton.

"Those guys were obsessed with reason and demanded a rational, observable explanation for *everything* before it could be taken seriously. They believed the entire universe could be rationally understood—and if something couldn't be observed or measured, it was tossed onto the bonfire of superstition, right next to the witches and religious heretics."

"Is that the *Scientific Method* you were talking about earlier?" asked George, who had genuinely surprised himself. Either he'd remembered it, or he was starting to hallucinate.

"Well done, George! Nice to see you've been paying attention," said the Director, relieved his talk might not have been a total waste of time after all.

"But, BREAKING NEWS: it turns out there *is* an underlying explanation for the Invisible Hand which Adam Smith knew nothing about during his lifetime, and this throws a whole new light on his economic theories."

"What is it?" asked George, hoping this might be the big idea they'd circled all night. He braced himself, secretly praying that after this mic-drop moment, he could finally go up to his room and get some sleep.

"You see," the Director continued, "when Smith landed on the term *Invisible Hand*, he didn't realise he was describing something that occurs quite often in nature—something we now know as *Spontaneous Order*. The best example I know is the starling murmuration [18]."

At this, George pulled out another *thoughtful expression* and touched his chin, as if to demonstrate his intrigue.

"You've seen them, right? Those clouds of birds that swoop and pulse across the sky as if they're dancing to music only they can hear.

"There's no leader, no traffic controller, no central plan, no rulebook. And yet somehow, thousands of individual birds manage to move together in perfect

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[18] **Starling murmurations** are a natural phenomena where many thousands of starlings move together in an intricate display of tight, swirling formations that seem to ripple and flow in dynamic shapes and patterns that constantly shift and evolve. Despite their seemingly complex nature, murmurations emerge from the collective behaviour of individual birds, each following simple rules of alignment, cohesion, and separation.
Why do flocks of birds swoop and swirl together in the sky? A biologist explains the science of murmurations. https://theconversation.com

harmony—reacting to each other, adjusting in real time, creating something beautiful and cohesive without anyone being in charge."

Faye nodded slowly. "I've seen them. Mesmerising. You see it with fish, too—sardines. When sharks attack a school, they twist into these incredible shapes to confuse it. Like one mind in thousands of bodies."

"Exactly," said the Director, smiling at the shared enthusiasm. "No single leader, no master plan—just tiny individual adjustments adding up to something extraordinary. That's *Spontaneous Order*. And that's what Smith was trying to capture with his Invisible Hand. He just didn't know how to explain it."

"Order without authority; coordination without coercion!" added Faye, unable to contain herself.

"That's a great way of putting it," said the Director appreciatively. "And it's not just a nature thing—look at open-source [19] software. People worldwide are collaborating on projects they care about, building complex systems without a boss telling them what to do.

"That kind of Spontaneous Order has led to amazing things—Linux [20], Wikipedia, Signal, WordPress…"

"Genuine anarchy [21]!" exclaimed Faye with delight.

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[19] **Open—source** refers to a collaborative approach to software development where the source code of a program is made freely available to the public, allowing anyone to view, modify, and distribute it. This model fosters transparency, innovation, and community participation, as developers from around the world can contribute to the improvement and evolution of the software. Open—source projects power much of the digital infrastructure we rely on today.
What is open source? https://opensource.com

[20] **Linux operating system** is a widely used open—source operating system that powers numerous service, including Ubuntu, Debian, and Fedora. It serves as the foundation for a vast array of computing devices, from servers and desktops to embedded systems and smartphones.
What is Linux? www.linux.com

[21] **Anarchy**: While some associate anarchy with chaos and disorder, many anarchists argue that true anarchy is about creating an organised, just, and cooperative society without coercion.
www.thoughtco.com

"Exactly!" the Director agreed. "Who'd have thought individual action and self-interest could naturally create order?"

"Sounds like something William Gibson [22] would say," noted Faye. "You know—*'the street finds its own uses for things* [23]*'* and all that."

"I was in a Gibson movie once," George mused, distractedly. "*Johnny Mnemonic*. Keanu Reeves. Not exactly an *Oscar* contender ."

The Director had no idea what George was talking about—but he was glad to see him back in the programme and contributing again.

"Even scientific discoveries often come from scientists tapping into one another's ideas—without a central hub," he continued. "Contrary to popular expectations, many scientific breakthroughs happen organically, rather than through any formal process. Penicillin, for example."

"Anarchy can build things just as well as tearing them down!" observed Faye, clearly enjoying this idea.

"Sounds spooky," said George.

"It *is* sort of spooky," agreed the Director. "The mathematician Steven Strogatz suggests that scientists find Spontaneous Order baffling because it seems to defy the laws of thermodynamics, which predict that things ought to fall apart, not come together in cohesive patterns.

"And yet, when we look through a telescope or a microscope, we see *magnificent structures—galaxies, cells, ecosystems, human beings—all*

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[22] **William Gibson** is an American—Canadian speculative fiction writer and essayist widely credited with pioneering the science fiction sub—genre known as cyberpunk and having envisioned both the internet and virtual reality before either existed.
William Gibson: the man who saw tomorrow www.theguardian.com
https://williamgibsonbooks.com

[23] **The street finds its own uses for things** is one of Gibson's most quoted phrases, first appearing in his book *Burning Chrome.*

somehow managing to assemble themselves. The enigma bedevils all of science today. [24]"

The Director quoted this from memory. George had ceased to wonder how.

"I should also say, *full disclosure*, I'm not the first to suggest that the Invisible Hand is an example of Spontaneous Order… That honour probably goes to an Austrian *neoliberal* [25] oddball named Friedrich von Hayek [26], who was, essentially, a 1940s Adam Smith on steroids—minus moral scruples."

"Thatcher and the Chilean dictator Pinochet loved him," said Faye, with a hint of contempt.

"I dislike him already," quipped George wryly.

"That she did," nodded the Director, glancing in the bartender's direction. "Hayek believed the whole of human society was an example of Spontaneous Order, but in his view, it was nothing more than the sum of individual transactions. Devoid of morals. Devoid of emotion.

"Thatcher was more or less paraphrasing him when she said, 'There's no such thing as society.'" added Faye happily to show her disdain for such an idea.

"She said that?" asked George, genuinely shocked.

The Director nodded. "To be more accurate, she said:

'Too many people believe if they have a problem, it's the government's job to fix it. "I have a problem; I'll get a grant." "I'm homeless; the government must house me." They're casting their problems on society. And, you know, there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are

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[24] From **Sync: The Emerging Science of Spontaneous Order** (2003) by Steven H. Strogatz

[25] **Neoliberal** is a political and economic ideology that advocates for free-market capitalism, limited government intervention in the economy, deregulation, privatisation, and reduced public spending.

[26] **Friedrich Hayek** (1899 — 1992) was an Austrian—British economist known for his contribution to free-market capitalist theory and his criticism of central planning and socialism. His most influential work, "The Road to Serfdom" (1944), warned against the dangers of collectivism and government intervention in the economy, arguing that such policies inevitably lead to tyranny and the erosion of individual freedom.
Who Was Friedrich Hayek? What Was His Economic Theory? www.investopedia.com

families. And no government can do anything except through people—and people must look to themselves first.' [27]"

"Jeez," said George, shaking his head at this cold, reductionist rejection of what Jean-Jacques Rousseau had called *The Social Contract* [28] two centuries earlier.

"Hayek took Smith's *Invisible Hand*, rebranded it as *Spontaneous Order*, and then used it to argue that free markets weren't just *one* option—they were the *only* option for human progress.

"And then," the Director added, "he went even further and insisted that greater inequality was a *good* thing."

"Psychopath," said George, flatly.

"I couldn't possibly comment," replied the Director with a faint smile.

"But in essence, Hayek had noticed that when politicians control a society, as happened in Soviet Russia after the revolution, that society tends to slide into totalitarianism.

"So he flipped the argument. He claimed that because *planned economies* could lead to tyranny, the best system was one that *wasn't planned at all*.

"He used Spontaneous Order to 'prove' that an economy works better when left entirely to its own devices—and that the idea of *Greed is Good* wasn't just excusable, but a perfectly reasonable and sane economic policy."

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[27] **Margaret Thatcher** — Interview for *Woman's Own* ("no such thing *[as society]*") 1987 Sep 23 **www.margaretthatcher.org**

[28] **In The Social Contract** (1762) Rousseau argues that individuals in a state of nature are free and equal, but as society develops, they enter into a social contract with one another, surrendering certain freedoms to the community in exchange for protection of their remaining rights. **www.worldhistory.org**

"Hayek's ideas directly led to the magical thinking behind *Trickle-Down Theory* [29] —the one I mentioned earlier," the Director continued. "The journalist William Blum [30] memorably described it as:

The principle that the poor, who must subsist on table scraps dropped by the rich, can best be served by giving the rich bigger meals."

"Other economists—like Karl Polanyi [31]—strongly disagreed with Hayek. He argued that a better example of Spontaneous Order would be the trade unions that came together to fight free-market theories like Trickle-Down.

"Which is ironic, if you think about it. But you don't hear much about Polanyi these days as his ideas don't fit the GRiFTer agenda."

"I'm beginning to see a pattern developing," said Faye.

"That turkeys don't vote for Christmas?" offered George playfully.

"Exactly," said the Director. "Hayek won that argument and inspired the Chicago School, which, in turn, influenced Nixon, who inspired Reagan and Thatcher.

"And the rest is neoliberal history."

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[29] **Trickle—down Theory,** (aka supply—side economics) states that policies aimed at benefiting the wealthy and corporations eventually "trickles down" to everyone else in society. Advocates argue that by incentivising investment, job creation, and economic growth at the top, the benefits will spread across all income levels.
Trickle—down Economics: Theory, Policies, Critique www.investopedia.com

[30] **William Blum** (1933 – 2018) was an American author and journalist and a critic of United States foreign policy. **https://williamblum.org**

[31] **Karl Polanyi** (1886–1964) was a Hungarian political economist, known for his book, *The Great Transformation*, published in 1944, which argues that free-market societies disrupted traditional social structures and led to social and environmental crises. He advocated for the protection of society from unrestricted capitalism.
Karl Polanyi: A Life on the Left https://academic.oup.com

"...written by the victors… but, as Carol Tavris [32] said, it's the *victims* who write the memoirs," added Faye, speaking from her day job as a political science undergrad, but unwilling to take credit for such a good line.

The Director nodded. "Yet when Hayek, following in Adam Smith's footsteps, took the phenomenon of Spontaneous Order and bent it to fit his free-market agenda, he also stripped the humanity out of human interactions and replaced it with algorithms and a market that knows the price of everything, and the value of nothing. And largely thanks to him, we've ended up where we are today."

Faye shook her head. She'd spent her last term studying Hayek and the problems his neoliberal zealot followers had unleashed, and this was bringing it all back.

"I'm no economist," said the Director, "but even I know that if you deregulate a market and let it rip, money and power will always float to the top."

"Which, I guess, was exactly the point the woman who designed *Monopoly* was trying to warn us about," said George, suddenly remembering all those Christmases he'd lost at that game. "There's only ever one winner—and a whole lot of losers."

"Which doesn't sound much like Spontaneous Order to me," added the Director. "Those starlings or sardines stick together because they instinctively know there's safety in numbers. They scatter and swirl to confuse their mutual enemy—and then reform once the danger has passed. And when you think about those peer-to-peer software enthusiasts working on open-source programmes, they're not doing it for the money. They do it because they enjoy working as part of a team, towards a shared goal and the simple satisfaction it

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[32] **Carol Tavris** (born 1944) is an American psychologist and feminist who wrote the book *Mistakes Were Made (but Not by Me)* (2007) which looks at how the perpetrators of hurtful acts justify their behaviour. **https://tavris.socialpsychology.org**

brings, with no thought of personal gain. In fact, most of them do it precisely because they're *not* working for *The Man* [33]."

"*COPitalism* in action," said Faye forcefully, once again trampling underfoot the hotel's client–staff boundary. "Which I'm pretty sure would be an alien concept to Hayek and his cold-hearted, money-mad disciples."

Faye's over-familiarity didn't faze the Director. He found it quietly heartening to hear her reiterate his ideas with such conviction.

"So, to conclude: Hayek and Smith were wrong to insist that society can only succeed when driven by the Invisible Hand of selfishness.

"Frankly, that's just the narrative pushed by the people upstairs, because that's the one that suits them best. But, in my view, their version of Spontaneous Order is about as 'natural' as a cancer that's slowly killing its host."

"Mr. Smith said the same thing in *The Matrix*," added George helpfully, for additional context.

"Fair enough," said the Director, with a nod of approval. "Cancer cells *might* be an example of Spontaneous Order, but they're also an anomaly. Because, unlike almost everything else in the natural world, they don't create sustainable ecosystems."

"When you put it like that, it's not exactly rocket science," said Faye, digesting the core of the idea.

"No, it isn't," agreed the Director. "But it suits the GRiFTer agenda—and more to the point, they don't want us to know that genuine Spontaneous Order doesn't fit the capitalist narrative.

"In reality, whether they realise it or not, free-market capitalists fear anything that resembles true Spontaneous Order because they can't control it. And if they can't control it, they can't own it. And if they can't own it… they can't

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[33] **The Man** refers to a person or entity seen as representing an oppressive authority, power, The Establishment and especially faceless corporations and corporate executives that disregard the interests or rights of the individual. The phrase is often used in expressions like 'stick it to the man', 'fighting against the man', 'add 6% sales tax for the man' and 'the man is keeping me down'.

make money from it. And that's exactly why Linux isn't now as popular as Windows, even though it's a fundamentally better operating system. We're not all using Linux on our laptops, and it isn't the most popular software in the world, because the GRiFTers can't monetise it."

"That's sooo fucked up," was all George could think to say.

"As I've said already—it's a lot easier to encourage people to be greedy than to encourage them to be kind."

"So maybe Smith wasn't describing the *best* way to run a society—just the most expedient; the one that best fitted the Establishment's agenda at the time and the easiest one to implement because it appealed to people's greed."

Faye was listening carefully to these political ideas.

"And maybe the same was true of Hayek." Continue the Director. "Perhaps he desperately *wanted* his version of the Invisible Hand to be true, because he was genuinely disturbed by what he saw happening in Russia.

"Maybe, for the best of reasons, he forcefully promoted the *Invisible Hand of Capitalism* because he'd seen what the *Dead Hand of Totalitarianism* could do. Either way, we've been living with the consequences ever since—and they've led us, inevitably, to this climate crisis we're grappling with."

"Nice summary," said Faye, in approving resignation.

"Thanks. But hey, kids, look at it this way," the Director said, hoping to inject a note of optimism. "If I'm right about this, then it's just as possible to build a society where people understand that, strategically speaking, *helping each other* is a better way of helping ourselves. Which I call mutual self-interest.

"It's a bit like what the Indian economist Amartya Sen said recently:

We should not fall into the trap of presuming that self-interest is, in any sense, more elemental than other values. Moral or social concerns can be just as elementary." [34]

While all this added up to quite a complicated idea—and he had to ask the Director to repeat it to make sure he'd heard it right—George finally felt they might be getting somewhere.

6.7. Let's Stay Together

The Director was now in full flow, laying out the argument he'd rehearsed many times in his head.

"George, can you cast your mind back to when we were walking beside the Thames, and I was telling you how Adam Smith wrote *The Wealth of Nations* from the relatively sophisticated viewpoint of a Western European?"

"Yeah…" replied George, a little hesitantly. This sounded like a trick question. At this point in the evening, he could barely stand, let alone remember what the Director had said five hours ago.

The Director pressed on. "Smith saw himself as a proud member of what he believed to be the greatest civilisation the world had ever known. Unsurprisingly, he viewed the British merchants now dominating the globe as a fine example of the Invisible Hand in action. So it didn't take much for him to conclude that Britain should simply carry on doing what it had done for the previous 300 years and fulfil the destiny the Invisible Hand was offering, which, in 1776, amounted to mass exploitation of the poor at home… and pretty much everyone else abroad."

"The bastards," said George.

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[34] **Amartya Kumar Sen** (born 1933) is an Indian economist and philosopher who received the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences in 1998 for his contributions to welfare economics, restoring an ethical dimension to economics. **www.lse.ac.uk**

"Seconded," agreed Faye.

"However," the Director continued, "if Adam Smith had cast his net a little wider when conducting his research, he might have reached some very different conclusions.

"As I've already explained—if he'd been less dismissive of what he considered primitive cultures, he might have found himself closer to agreeing with Adam Ferguson's theories."

"Really?" asked Faye, a little surprised. She'd studied some of Ferguson's ideas in her coursework but had never seen them in this light.

"Sure!" said the Director. "To give Smith his due, he looked at Ancient Greece, the Romans, even Chinese trade systems. But he completely overlooked the barter economies used by agrarian societies—like the peoples inhabiting North America at the time. People who were more or less wiped out thanks to capitalism. And he probably didn't consider the way those societies interacted with each other to be of any value to his studies. I mean, he called Native Americans 'savages.'"

George was not impressed.

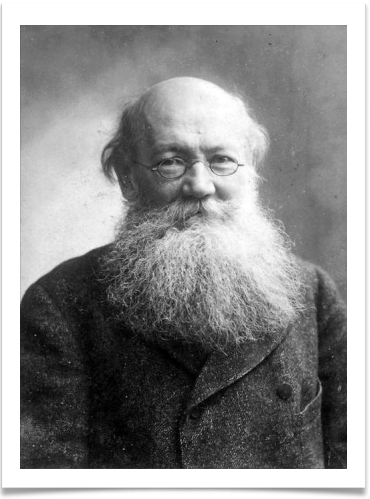
"Smith might have been a great thinker for his time, but he was no anthropologist. If he'd looked a little further afield, he might have realised that a selfish Invisible Hand was just one of many possible economic systems."

The Director paused, then added with a shrug, "But he lacked all the ingredients needed for that particular picnic."

"I mean—imagine if he'd known about Peter Kropotkin!"

"Doctor Kropotkin?" asked George hopefully. "You mean that character from my Super Mario video game?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about, George," replied the Director, puzzled. "But I'll look into it… The Kropotkin I'm talking about looked like Father Christmas, but in reality, he was a Russian prince who spent years observing wildlife behaviour in Siberia. And from that, he developed some



revolutionary ideas that might've made Adam Smith pause and reflect."

"I like where you're going with this," said Faye, who knew she'd be studying Kropotkin in a module on anarchism next term.

"Kropotkin had made detailed studies of how animals cooperate in the wild," the Director continued. "Most of them were members of the same species—but sometimes, different species helped each other out.

"They foraged for food together, hunted in packs, warned each other of predators, even built communal nests.

"All of which could be considered Spontaneous Order—if Smith had ever come across the idea.

"And now, of course, it's obvious: this kind of Invisible Hand—the one Kropotkin saw at work in Siberia—is the force behind stable, self-regulating ecosystems. It would've blown Smith's theory clean out of the water."

"It was a long way from the dog-eat-dog vision of the natural world the that the sociologist Herbert Spencer had in mind when he coined the term *Survival of the Fittest.*[35]"

Faye winced a little at this term.

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[35] **Herbert Spencer** (1820 to 1903) was an English philosopher, biologist, anthropologist, and sociologist best known for his theory of *Social Darwinism*, which applied Charles Darwin's principles of natural selection and evolution to human societies. Spencer coined the term 'survival of the fittest,' which he used to justify laissez—faire and social inequalities.
From 'natural selection' to 'survival of the fittest': On the significance of Spencer's refashioning of Darwin https://journals.sagepub.com

"Spencer cynically hijacked the ideas of both Charles Darwin and Adam Smith to support his own right-wing political ideology—especially his belief that human advancement relied on competition," the Director continued.

"Kropotkin disagreed. He understood that the laws of nature applied just as much to humans as to animals—and that successful societies were almost always built on cooperation.

"Something I like to think of as *the survival of the kindest*."

"Nice," observed Faye approvingly.

"So I'm sure if Smith and Kropotkin had ever met, they'd have had much to discuss," said the Director. "Unfortunately, it never happened—they were born almost a century apart.

"But if they *had* met, Kropotkin would've been able to describe what a hundred years of capitalism and the Industrial Revolution had done to the planet—and just how pivotal *The Wealth of Nations* had been in shaping that system."

"A sort of half-time highlights reel?" suggested George.

"A terrible mismatch, more like," corrected Faye, who already knew the score.

Picking up the theme playfully, the Director added, "Yes—he'd point out that GRiFTers United were 5–0 up, that environmental disaster and social injustice were running rampant down both wings, and that the GRiFTers' *laissez-faire* tactics were stacking the odds in favour of the wealthy elite."

"Smith wouldn't have been too impressed," suggested George.

"You're right," agreed the Director. "But I like to think he'd have at least listened to Kropotkin's suggestion—maybe switched to a more structured *Mutual Aid* [36] formation, based on teamwork rather than individual flair."

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[36] M**utual Aid** emphasises the importance of cooperation, reciprocity, and solidarity in building resilient and supportive communities and is based on the idea that people can collectively address their common challenges and problems by pooling resources, skills, and knowledge. It can be particularly valuable during times of crisis, such as natural disasters, economic downturns, or pandemics, when traditional systems may be overwhelmed or inaccessible. **What Is Mutual Aid, And How Can It Transform Our World? www.globalgiving.org**

By this point, the contrived allusion to soccer management had become far too niche for George to follow, so the Director returned to something more prosaic.

"So I hope I've explained how we might swap out capitalism for something better—something I think Adam Smith would recognise. And, being a well-meaning—if somewhat misguided—kind of guy, I think he might even have agreed with it.

"Hopefully, he'd have seen that his precious *Invisible Hand* wasn't necessarily—or exclusively—driven by self-interest. That maybe his mate Adam Ferguson had been more on the right track with his vision of a kinder society. Adam Smith might even have realised the monster he'd created could end up destroying the planet. And that, perhaps… it might've been better if he'd just kept his big mouth shut."

6.8. Bring Me A Higher Love

At the end of his speech, the Director drained his glass with a satisfied gulp.

"You look as if you could do with a little *mutual aid* yourself," said Faye, who'd been quietly polishing the same glass for the past ten minutes. "Care for a top-up?"

"Great idea!" smiled the Director. "And the same for my friend here. And have one yourself."

"So, I get it," said George, energised again now that the conversation had turned more upbeat. "Maybe Adam Smith got it wrong. He was looking at a world where wealthy people were already doing very well for themselves, so he assumed that was just how life worked."

"Indeed," agreed the Director. "And Smith was fundamentally a good man—the last thing he wanted was to hand the opportunists at the East India Company a how-to guide for transitioning from stifling mercantilism into the

dynamic—and vastly more profitable—world of capitalism. Foolishly, he seems to have hoped *The Wealth of Nations* would inspire reform. Which, in hindsight, was a little… *glaikit* [37]."

He paused, swirling and then smelling the last few drops in his glass.

"But maybe that's where we have an advantage; we don't have to write a new *Wealth of Nations*. We just have to create the conditions where something better can emerge. Something that isn't based on command-and-control or political ideology. Just a better design that encourages cooperation, care, and long-term thinking.

"Because Spontaneous Order still works… if you give it the right environment to grow in."

He set down his glass. "And let's be honest—many of the businessmen on the board of the East India Company were also Members of Parliament, with a vested interest in their own private incomes—and they were the ones making the laws they profited from. Is it any wonder they used the juicier parts of *The Wealth of Nations* to justify their capitalist excesses, while conveniently editing out the bits that didn't suit them?"

"The bastards," muttered Faye.

"I've been saying *that* all night!" chuckled George. "So let me see if I've got this: Smith screwed up—but you're saying this *Spontaneous Order* thing could still save us… by organising us into a more cooperative society?"

"Precisely," replied the Director, once again admiring George's perspicacity.

"So, if you're right, what do we do next? Tell me before I die of suspense… or alcohol poisoning, whichever comes first."

The Director was becoming increasingly fond of his guileless ingénue, and this encouraged him to press on.

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[37] **Glaikit** – A Scottish term which literally means foolish, vacant, or not very bright.

"Sure," he said. "So we've talked about how capitalism isn't some grand conspiracy designed by the *Illuminati* [38], just a lot of little greedy dragons like me and you, too selfish to give up our comfortable lifestyles without knowing there's something just as good waiting for us around the corner.

"And, as I've tried to explain, I believe *COPitalism* is perhaps that something we've been looking for."

"Cool. So if I was ready to sign up for a COPitalist lifestyle… where do I start?" asked Faye. "Where are the companies I can buy my COPitalist products and services from? Do they even exist—or is this just more wishful thinking?" She was far more worldly—and therefore more sceptical—than George.

"Sure they do," reassured the Director.

"Really?" asked George, looking around. "Plenty of brands *claim* to be saving the planet—but when you look more closely, they're as bad as the rest."

"Just so much greenwashing," added Faye, dismissively.

"Exactly," agreed the Director. "Right now, we have to be really cautious about what we buy—because there's a ton of dodgy marketing out there, tricking us into believing certain brands are eco-friendly when they're anything *but*.

"The GRiFTers flaunt their ESG credentials, preach about their ethics—and since we're short on both time and information, we often assume they wouldn't be *brazen* and cynical enough to lie about something so important. But they do. And they get away with it. But what if we started paying more attention to what we buy—and, more crucially, refused to support products that harm the planet—we'd force the GRiFTers to change their tune."

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[38] **The Illuminati** is a term often used to refer to various secretive groups or organisations, both historical and speculative. In modern times, the term "Illuminati" is often used in conspiracy theories to describe a shadowy, powerful group that allegedly controls world events and manipulates governments and economies for its own agenda

"But would they?" asked George, sceptically. "Will these horrible people ever behave honestly?"

"Would you believe me," asked the Director, "if I told you that a hundred years ago, there were lots of COPitalist-style companies in the UK—and there's no reason we can't have a lot more of them again?"

"Are you sure?" George pressed. "You're saying there were *ethical* businesses with real moral values—even *before* the law forced them to be legal, decent, honest, and truthful?" [39]

"Yeah, that's exactly what I'm saying, George. It's hard to believe, but back in Victorian times, plenty of UK businesses rejected the ruthless 'survival of the fittest' model of capitalism—and not only did they survive, they *thrived*. They were massively successful, even though profit wasn't their only priority."

"Wow!" said George, genuinely surprised. After everything he'd heard about the cutthroat nature of capitalism, this was a revelation.

"Unlike most big corporations today, which only care about keeping shareholders happy, these early COPitalists put social and ethical responsibility first. They saw it as part of their duty to provide a decent standard of living for their workers."

"Nineteenth-century COPitalism in action!" Faye exclaimed, surprised.

"Sounds nice, but they can't have been *that* successful," said George, sceptically. "Otherwise, I'd have heard of them."

"You probably have," the Director replied, with a knowing smile. "I mean, I'm sure you've eaten Quaker Oats for breakfast… and I know you love British chocolate—because you eat it all the time.

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[39] The phrase **"legal, decent, honest, and truthful"** comes from the **UK's Advertising Standards Authority (ASA)** and represents the key principles advertisers must follow. The UK **Trade Descriptions Act 1968** was one of the earliest laws empowering **Trading Standards** to take action against misleading business practices. **www.legislation.gov.uk**

"Cadbury's, Fry's, and Rowntree's? All Quaker [40] businesses. "And those shoes you're wearing—Clarks, right?"

"That's right. Wallabees," George confirmed. "They're a cool brand. Everyone in LA wears them."

"Well, once upon a time, they were a Quaker firm, too."

"I did *not* know that," said George.

"Yep. And how about GlaxoSmithKline? Johnson & Johnson—before Big Pharma bought them out? Or Barclays and Lloyds Bank, before they were gobbled up by the economic dragon that's now slowly killing us?"

"Cool!" said George. "Tell me more."

"Well, back in 1895, a Quaker named George Cadbury was busy making chocolate in Birmingham when he realised how hard it was for his workers to stay healthy, given the city's dirty, overcrowded conditions.

"So, he moved his factory five miles out of town into the fresh countryside, where he built a model village called Bournville [41]. It became home to 2,500 of his employees, who now enjoyed high-quality housing, green spaces, schools, a swimming pool, sports fields, a library, a reading room—and even a musical tower! The whole place was designed with inspiration from the Arts & Crafts movement."

George was impressed.

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[40] **The Quakers**, formally known as the Religious Society of Friends, are a Christian religious movement that emerged in England during the 17th century. The movement was founded by George Fox in the mid—17th century as a dissenting Protestant group. The term "Quakers" originated as a derisive label given to the group because members were said to "quake" or tremble under the influence of divine inspiration.

The Quakers are known for several key beliefs and practices:

1. Direct Experience of God rather than formal rituals and clergy—led worship
2. Peace and Nonviolence
3. Equality and Social Justice
4. Simplicity and Integrity

Quakerism has spread beyond its origins in England and is now practiced worldwide.
https://www.quaker.org.uk

[41] **Bournville Village** **www.cadburyworld.co.uk**

"Wow, indeed. But sadly, in 2010—after 120 years—Cadbury's was bought by a predatory dragon called Mondelez." [42]

"Oh, crap," said George, dismayed.

"And Unilever?" the Director prompted knowingly.

"What—those chancers who claimed to go green but just ended up greenwashing?" George scoffed.

"That's the one," the Director confirmed. "As I mentioned earlier, Unilever is now one of the world's biggest consumer goods giants—but back in 1888, it was just a small, family-run soap business in Liverpool.

"The man behind it, William Hesketh Lever, was a Congregationalist—but like the Quakers, he believed in improving the lives of his workers and their families."And like Cadbury, he built a model village—*Port Sunlight* [43] —on the banks of the River Mersey, where over 3,000 of his employees lived among stunning architecture, green spaces, a hospital, schools, a church, shops, a swimming pool, a theatre, a gym, and even an art gallery.

"Pretty forward-thinking for 1888, wouldn't you say?"

"You're not kidding!" George replied, genuinely impressed. "Building those villages must've cost a fortune. No chance Mondelez or Unilever would do the same today—unless it lined their pockets somehow."

"George Cadbury and William Lever must be spinning in their graves," Faye muttered dryly.

"For those early socially conscious businessmen, it wasn't just about the money. They weren't obsessed with slashing costs or exploiting workers through zero-hours contracts. What we now call ESG was already ingrained in their culture—a century before it became a trendy PR tool. It wasn't a façade.

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[42] **Cadbury was sold to Kraft Foods (now called Mondelez) in 2010** for £11.5 billion ($19.5 billion) after a hostile takeover. The takeover was controversial, especially after Kraft closed a UK factory it had initially promised to keep open. **www.ft.com**

[43] **Port Sunlight** - Discover the village built on soap **https://portsunlightvillage.com/**

These visionary businesses even led the way in gender equality, letting women rise to top management roles. Their companies made excellent products, earned respect as pillars of the community, and contributed meaningfully to society. Their integrity made them highly trustworthy—which, in turn, led to more loyal customers… and even greater success."

"Wonderful!" said George, while Faye just smiled approvingly—she knew all about these stories of Victorian philanthropy.

"The point I'm making," the Director continued, "is that Quaker entrepreneurs saw business as a way to serve something *higher* than just profit.

"And like the King of Bhutan, they had ambitions beyond just wanting to be filthy rich. They had other priorities.

"As you say, Faye, they were a perfect example of COPitalism. So it's a tragedy that most of these businesses were gobbled up by the Dragon and sold to the GRiFTers.

"But a few still survive—and it's time we brought back a few more to sort out our society."

"That would be good," said George, a little wistfully.

"But there are plenty of examples—even today—of companies trying to do something similar," said the Director. "Think of all the mutual societies, cooperatives, not-for-profits, charitable organisations, community interest companies, and employee-owned businesses. Look at the *John Lewis Partnership—Waitrose, Peter Jones* [44]—they share profits with their partners.

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[44] **John Lewis Partnership/Waitrose/Peter Jones:** "Over 100 years ago our Founder, John Spedan Lewis, began an experiment into a better way of doing business by including staff in decision making on how the business would be run. He wanted to create a way of doing business that was both commercial *and* democratic, giving every Partner a voice in the business they co—own. This combination, so ahead of its time, continues to make us what we are today." **www.johnlewispartnership.co.uk**

Or *Richer Sounds* [45], the hi-fi chain that handed over 60% of its business to its staff. And then there's *Patagonia*." [46]

"Tell me about *Patagonia*," implored George. "I've got a ton of their gear."

"Well, *Patagonia* was founded in 1973 by an American called Yvon Chouinard. Until 2022, it was a private company, which meant it didn't have to worry about giving institutional shareholders their pound of flesh—or being bought out in a hostile takeover like *Cadbury's*. He was independent. He could do whatever he liked. In 2020, that included sewing labels into Patagonia clothing that said *Vote the Assholes Out*, because he didn't want Trump re-elected.

"This attitude made him even more popular with his loyal fans—and it made him a billionaire almost by accident, which horrified him! So he gave away ownership of the business to the *Holdfast Collective* [47]—a trust dedicated to fighting the environmental crisis. And the amazing part? Patagonia's sales have kept growing because people increasingly want to buy from brands with authenticity, principles, and courage."

"Superb!" exclaimed George, excited.

"I just wish more businesses would realise that being good for the planet is also good for business. And it's not like the climate crisis is going away. In

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[45] **Richer Sounds:** "Our Founder, Julian Richer, began buying and selling hi-fi separates at school when he was 14. In 1978, aged 19, he opened his first shop on London Bridge Walk. In May 2019, he sold 60% of his shares in the business (thus handing control) to an employee ownership trust." **www.richersounds.com**

[46] **Who owns Patagonia?** "Patagonia's new owners are the Holdfast Collective and the Patagonia Purpose Trust. *The Holdfast Collective* owns 98% of the company and all of the nonvoting stock. The Patagonia Purpose Trust owns 2% of the company and all of the voting stock. Nonvoting stock carries economic value but not decision—making authority. Voting stock has both economic value and decision—making authority. Put another way, Patagonia's purpose is: We're in business to save our home planet. The Patagonia Purpose Trust ensures the company's commitment to its purpose forever." **https://eu.patagonia.com**

[47] The ***Holdfast Collective*** — A network of small collectives, helping each other build value and solve problems without the exchange of any currency. **https://holdfast.group**

five years, it'll be a lot worse than it is now—so I'd like to think successful companies will be the ones that tried to do something about it early."

"Agreed," nodded George approvingly. "So what you're saying is—we should buy from independent COPitalists whenever we can… and avoid Global, Rent-Extracting, Financialised, Tax-Evading, GRiFTer businesses *whenever possible*!"

"THAT IS *EXACTLY* what I'm saying," the Director replied, stridently. "But then… there's the Ben & Jerry's [48] of this world."

"Ben & Jerry's?" asked Faye. "Nice ice cream. They *used* to be cool—until they sold out to Unilever."

"That's right. But in reality, they stayed an independent subsidiary of our old pals at Unilever—who, I'd presume, thought that having a progressive, left wing company in their portfolio would help boost their 'ESG' credentials," the

"That's right," the Director nodded. "*Ben & Jerry's* has been a thorn in *Unilever's* side ever since the takeover, constantly challenging the corporate line and refusing to shut up about social justice. I'd imagine *Unilever* liked the idea of having a progressive brand to polish their ESG credentials but once they decided to dumped all that '*green crap*,' as David Cameron once described it [49], I bet they wish they could dump *Ben & Jerry's* too [50]."

"It'll be interesting to see what happens next," reflected George.

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[48] "We're guessing most of you know by now that **Ben & Jerry's** is a wholly owned subsidiary of Unilever, but we're betting you've never met our independent Board of Directors…It's not a governing body in the conventional sense, but a (very!) independent B.O.D. that's empowered to protect and defend Ben & Jerry's brand equity and integrity. We love making ice cream — but using our business to make the world a better place gives our work its meaning." **www.benjerry.com**

[49] **www.theguardian.com** - David Cameron at centre of 'get rid of all the green crap' storm. No 10 says it does not recognise the phrase but prime minister's team does not explicitly deny such a statement was made.

[50] **https://www.npr.org** - Ben & Jerry's alleges its CEO was fired over its political activism. Here's the scoop.

"Agreed," replied the Director. "It's hard to change the system from the inside, which is what Ben & Jerry's was trying to do."
"It's pretty hard to claim you're the good guys when you're also trying to please institutional investors with zero morals," observed Faye.
"Also agree," said the Director. "Though I'd say it's more accurate to call them *amoral*. Investment and venture capital firms don't have a sense of right and wrong—that would be falling into the trap of anthropomorphising them, as if they were some kind of gentleman's club. But they're not. They're inhuman, autonomous entities—like machines—devoid of human interference. Their sole purpose is to maximise profit. Nothing more, nothing less. It's just an algorithm looking for financial gain and it'll take it wherever it can find it. So avoid them whenever you can."
"Gotcha," said George, wanting to show he understood, though unsure in what circumstances he'd ever have to deal with an institutional investor.

6.9 Best Things In Life Are Free

"And while we're talking about alternatives to working for the Man, let's remember the millions of people—doctors, nurses, teachers, charity workers—all making a fraction of what they might earn if they'd chosen a so-called proper job," said the Director, showing his disdain for what, in the commercial sector, might be considered a respectable career. "These people don't work just to make as much money as possible. Sure, money matters—but what really motivates them is the satisfaction and reward of helping others."
"They're COPitalist too!" exclaimed Faye, realising the concept applied to a broader section of society than she'd first assumed.
The Director was pleased to see the full implications of his idea slowly dawning on his audience. "Imagine where we'd be if more people followed the example of teachers or nurses—skilled professionals who don't just want

to pile up cash, but want to make a real difference. Or if more business owners behaved like the Quakers, understanding that philanthropy isn't just good for the soul—it's good for business. And think about what we could achieve if we stopped feeding the GRiFTer dragons and started spending our money wisely. I'm telling you—it would shake society to its core. It would put those investment bankers out of work, dry up the bond and currency markets, and force offshore tax havens to find new ways to hustle. And best of all, without these parasites living off us while contributing nothing, we wouldn't even miss them. The world would be a better, safer place."

"You go, Sir!" shouted George enthusiastically. The Director had been on a roll, prompting George and Faye to exchange smiles in appreciation of his stamina, energy, and passion.

"Why is this so hard to imagine?" he pressed on. "Why am *I* the eccentric for proposing something like this? After all, the world would be better—and we wouldn't be slowly destroying ourselves."

"Of course," the Director continued without missing a beat, "the GRiFTers would claim that without their investment, the economy would collapse, thousands of businesses would fail, and there'd be no funding for innovation. But that's a myth. In fact, the exact opposite is true. With the GRiFTers out of the way, we wouldn't be throwing money at pointless ventures designed to make a quick buck—we'd invest in the projects that actually made our lives better, the ones we currently ignore because they don't offer instant returns. Remember the *New Deal* and the *Welfare State*? They only happened because the banks and stock markets had failed—and for a moment, we had a little breathing space to do something useful."

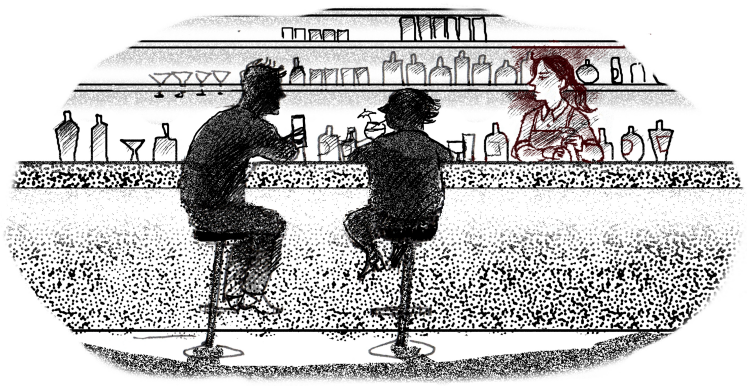
With that, the Director paused, took a deep breath, and savoured the aroma of his whisky as he gathered his thoughts for the final point he was about to make.

"If *Patagonia* can find ways to break free from the capitalist trap, so can millions of other businesses—especially if their customers choose to support them. It's about prioritising quality over quantity. Buy less, buy better."

"The GRiFTers don't want you to think like this," the Director added. "Who knows what would happen if we ever realised we held all the power? We don't need a revolution to topple the bourgeoisie—we need to stop buying into their destructive capitalist game."

"Now we're getting somewhere," said George, with a tone of finality and ready for action. "So, what do we do next?"

7: The Nightcap Pt.2 – ALL THINGS MUST PASS



7.1. I Can See Clearly Now

The Director sat back and smiled, satisfied with his evening's work.

"George, if Karl Marx were here with us now, I've got a feeling he'd be pretty disappointed with how things have turned out."

"You're probably right," agreed George. "And I expect he'd also be wondering why he was sitting in a cocktail bar at half past one in the morning."

"That too!" said the Director, grinning. "The first thing he'd probably ask is, *'How's the revolution coming along?'*"

"And we'd have to tell him it's not looking great," chimed in the bartender, holding a glass up to the light to check for lipstick—clearly feeling she was now among comrades.

"I'm afraid you're right," confirmed the Director, somewhat sanguine.

Warming to her theme, she continued, "We'd also have to break the news that, despite having nothing to lose but their chains, the workers of the world have yet to unite—or grasp the means of production."

"Right again," said the Director with a laugh. "I'd have to explain that, despite his predictions, the financial elite have ruthlessly clung to power through a mix of gaslighting, intimidation, and good old-fashioned cultural hegemony. Turns out, the lazy, entitled ruling class were far better at selling the capitalist dream than Karl could've ever imagined."

"The proletariat was far too willing to lap it up," Faye added. "They wanted to enjoy the middle-class party too. What a disappointing bunch of spineless melts. And if Gramsci, Žižek, and Mark Fisher were here too, they could fill him in on all the grim details," she finished with a grin.

"Whoa! It's getting crowded in here!" George laughed.

"I'd better put out some more glasses!" said Faye, chuckling.

"However," continued the Director, enjoying this injection of mirth, "we could inform him of a plot twist he might not have seen coming."

"Spoiler alert!" shouted George, while the bartender leaned in closer, keen to hear this newsflash.

"We could tell him that, thanks to global warming—and the increasingly likely possibility of mass extinction—the bourgeoisie had seen the writing on the wall, switched allegiance, and turned their backs on the status quo in the nick of time."

"You're right—I did *not* see that coming!" confirmed Faye, now pouring herself a whisky to help digest this news.

"Those capitalist GRiFTers had a good run raping and pillaging society in pursuit of unrestrained economic growth—but hey, all good things must come to an end," said the Director sardonically. "And when the middle classes no longer support the system, the game's up."

"*A house divided against itself cannot stand,*" [51] quoted Faye.

"To Abraham Lincoln!" toasted the Director, lifting his glass.

"Abe Lincoln!" agreed George and Faye, clinking their glasses. The Director was increasingly impressed with this intelligent young lady.

"And when that happens, we enter uncharted waters," he continued. "The Titanic is going down—and everyone who can still walk is fighting to get into the lifeboats."

"Capitalist rats are leaving a sinking ship," added George tartly.

"Precisely," agreed the Director. "Yet the GRiFTers insist there's nothing to worry about, instructing the band to play on as if everything's just fine. After all, the last thing they need is for us all to start panicking. But we've all seen how this movie ends."

"Yeah—DiCaprio's pasty face sinking beneath the icy waves," reflected George, clearly irritated by the memory of yet another lead role he'd auditioned for but that DiCaprio got before him. "Winslet thought I was too short. The cow."

Choosing to ignore this great injustice—while also determining never to admit he'd originally offered George's part to DiCaprio—the Director continued, "You know, it'll almost be worth it to see the first-class passengers finally having to mix with the huddled masses in steerage."

"Oh, the irony!" smiled Faye, as she imagined the scene.

"At least, it would be funny if it wasn't so tragic," agreed the Director. "But I'm sorry to say, this is precisely what will happen if the GRiFTers keep

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[51] **Lincoln** was suggesting there could be no compromise over slavery. You've got to be on one side or the other.

steering the ship. They'll plough on regardless—heading for the nearest iceberg—because they don't believe we can sink. And they won't stop until we're all floating face down in a sea of hubris."

Not hearing the Director's earlier speech about hubris, Faye politely asked him to elaborate.

"Well," he responded earnestly, "there are hundreds of solutions to the energy crisis just waiting to be developed—but we keep ignoring them because they don't represent a good return on investment."

"Why's that?" asked Faye, sensing she already knew the answer but wanting to hear it from the horse's mouth.

"Because our hubris is getting in the way," he confirmed. "There are countless ways we could stop pumping billions of tons of carbon into the atmosphere—but none of them will be developed if the first question we ask is, *'Yes, but will it make me money?'* If the solution to the climate crisis has to return a healthy profit to the GRiFTers—then we're never going to make it."

"We've got kamikaze pilots steering the ship!" shouted George in mock panic. "We need a mutiny!"

"You're a regular *Fletcher Christian*." [52] smiled an amused Faye.

"That's me!" agreed George cheerfully. "A modern-day Mel Gibson!"

The Director asked, genuinely curious, "Do you draw all of your references from movies you watched as a kid?"

"Pretty much," confirmed George. "Doesn't everyone?"

"Maybe," replied Faye, trying not to sound superior. "But I'd take Brando over Gibson any day—sexier, and much less antisemitic."

"One thing's for sure," said the Director, steering the conversation back to his nautical theme. "We can't keep going the way we have. Something has to change. But it would be foolish to think we can simply throw the capitalists

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[52] **Fletcher Christian** (1764 — 93) was a seaman and leading mutineer on HMS Bounty, under the command of William Bligh.

overboard and paddle to safety. The truth is, even if we knew which way to go, there's no telling we'd make it to shore."

Whisky in hand, the Director took a moment to look into their two keen, if somewhat squiffy, faces.

"The answers won't come in the form of a silver bullet or a one-size-fits-all solution. We'll need all the imagination and ingenuity we can muster to save ourselves. It'll be messy, and some of our actions might even make things worse. But in the long run—as long as we all pull together in the spirit of enlightened self-interest [53] there's still just about enough time to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat."

George felt slightly blinded by this blizzard of clichés. Still, he clung on grimly, hoping that somewhere beneath all the platitudes, the Director might yet deliver the answers he was seeking. So far, the Director's diagnosis had felt plausible—so, with luck, his prescription for recovery would be equally easy to swallow.

"That's great, Sir," he queried. "So, if we remove the profit motive from the process… are there enough new ideas out there to save us?"

"Certainly there are!" confirmed the Director reassuringly, now sounding like a kindly uncle. "There are hundreds—if not thousands—of clean energy alternatives, if we could just be bothered to look. But there hasn't been the urgency or the will to develop them, up to now. In reality, many of these clean energy sources are incredibly cheap and require almost no effort to be brought to market."

"That's a problem?" asked George, incredulously. "Are you sure?"

"Absolutely, I am," the Director responded emphatically. "Did you know we can now power our cars using salt?"

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[53] **Enlightened self—interest** encourages individuals to consider the broader consequences of their actions, recognising that personal well—being is intricately linked to the welfare of others. **Enlightened Self—Interest: What It Is And Why It Matters https://thoughtacademy.com**

"Salt?" asked Faye, confused. "You mean the stuff I dip the rim of my margarita glasses in?"

"The very same," confirmed the Director. "You see, up to now, there's been almost no interest in developing sodium batteries [54] —because the GRiFTers can't see how to make money out of it. I mean, how the hell do you make money from something you can get out of seawater? Where's the markup in that? Right now, sodium batteries are bulky, but that's only because we haven't tried very hard to make them small and lightweight."

George and Faye were both flummoxed by this.

"Then look at air-source heat pumps [55]. Any government serious about reducing its carbon footprint would have fitted one to every house in the country, free of charge! They're just glorified refrigerators in reverse—a simple piece of kit that would cost a fraction of what manufacturers charge for them. But that would be too easy. Where's the money in that? So instead, they're flogged at ten grand a pop, and an army of dodgy salesmen call us every day trying to convince us we need one."

He leaned back, letting that sink in.

"And then, of course, there's the most boring, but most effective alternative of all."

"Oh yeah? What's that?" asked Faye, sceptically.

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[54] **Sodium Batteries** represent a promising avenue for energy storage technology, leveraging the abundance and low cost of sodium to address the growing demand for efficient and sustainable energy storage solutions.
Firms are exploring sodium batteries as an alternative to lithium. Unlike lithium, sodium is cheap and abundant www.economist.com

[55] **Why Are Air Source Heat Pumps So Expensive? A Detailed Look at the High Initial Costs:** Low market competition – The UK heat pump market is still quite small. With few suppliers, prices remain high due to a lack of competition. Installation and maintenance are also significant factors driving up the cost of an air source heat pump. Proper installation by certified professionals helps ensure optimal performance and efficiency. This expertise does not come cheap, with labour accounting for £2,000 to £4,000 of the total air source heat pump cost. **https://contemporarystructures.co.uk**

"Insulation, my friend," replied the Director, with a hint of satisfaction.
"Insulation?" asked George, pretending to yawn to show his lack of excitement.
"Damn right!" confirmed the Director, undeterred by this lack of enthusiasm for such a humdrum answer. "Net Zero [56] is a lot easier to reach when you don't waste energy in the first place. I know it isn't sexy, but you don't need to heat a house that's already warm. Of course, there's not much money to be made from stuffing your old socks and jumpers in the loft, so nobody bothers [57]. That's not how capitalism works. Capitalism only works when there's profit to be made, and if there's no selfish benefit to be gained, it simply doesn't happen."
He leaned forward for emphasis.
"The idea that the profit motive drives innovation is a great myth. Dragon Capitalists are only interested in innovation when there's the chance to profit. And there's certainly no money in salt and old socks—so we're all left to die!"
"Oh, come on!" exclaimed Faye, pushing back. "What about Thomas Edison? James Watt? They were great inventors and made a ton of money out of capitalism!"
It was a completely valid challenge to the Director's theory and, for a moment, he felt disappointed with himself for assuming this bartender was just a pretty face with a cocktail shaker.

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[56] **Net Zero** refers to the balance between the amount of greenhouse gases produced and the amount removed from the atmosphere. Achieving net zero emissions is considered crucial for addressing climate change.
What is net zero and how can we get there? https://energysavingtrust.org.uk

[57] Consumers can face some complex and costly choices when deciding how to upgrade their **home insulation**. New research recommends governments should help homeowners engage with these issues and ensure they have the information and advice they need.
Empowering homeowners to insulate their homes through improved awareness and information www.which.co.uk

"Maybe so," he said, accepting the challenge. "But what do computers, the internet, the sat-nav in your car, non-stick frying pans, and polio vaccines all have in common?"

"Don't tell me," replied George facetiously. "They've all been prizes on *Jeopardy*?"

"Not exactly," said the Director. "But close. They were all developed thanks to public funding."

"Ah… that was going to be my second guess," lied George.

"And without public money, provided by taxpayers like me and you, those rockets Bezos and Musk are so quick to claim as the fruits of their genius would never have got off the ground."

"Just phallic symbols anyway," muttered Faye, unimpressed. "They must have tiny dicks."

"Yes—and without public money, they'd have never got them up," chuckled the Director.

"Projectile dysfunction," added Faye, with admirable comic timing.

"The same's true of hundreds of inventions we now take for granted, they all needed public money. If we'd left it to those genius entrepreneurs like Bezos and Musk, we wouldn't have developed vaccines, and the hospitals would still have polio wards."

"But Amazon would be doing a roaring trade in callipers and iron lungs," said George flatly.

"So pat yourself on the back, George, and…" the Director squinted at Fayes tag yet again. "…Faye—because you've certainly played your part in making the world a better place."

"No thanks to those assholes who think they're so superior to us little people," added Faye.

"…And to whom they avoid paying their taxes!" said George pointedly.

At this, the three friends clinked their glasses in a mutual cheers of self-congratulation.
"To vaccines!" toasted George.
"FINALLY!" exclaimed Faye suddenly, slamming her shot glass onto the bar so abruptly that George thought she might smash it.
"What have I said now?" asked George, concerned by her sudden outburst.
"I'M NOT CRAZY! I've been saying this for years!"
"Saying what?" asked George.
"Those egotists on *Dragon's Den* ARE assholes!" she exploded.
"Couldn't agree more," said George, amused. "They call it the *Shark Tank* in the States—but they're more like clownfish than sharks."
"Being filthy rich isn't enough for them," added the Director. "They've got to be on the telly as well, to remind us how superior they are."
"But they're no smarter than I am!" rejoined Faye. "Bezos, Branson, Zuckerberg, Musk—just attention-seeking narcissists, all of them!"
The Director nodded in agreement. "Have you noticed how the people we hold up as the most successful examples of capitalism are also borderline sociopaths? It's no coincidence. Capitalism works best when you're an extremist who doesn't conform to social norms. Normal people just aren't ruthless enough."
George thought about this momentarily and wondered why this had never occurred to him.
"And what's more," said Faye, "they just happened to be in the right place at the right time, or had a rich daddy or something. So why do we treat them like they're so special?"
"Bezos, Branson, Zuckerberg, and Musk—sounds like a firm of second-rate tax advisors," smiled the Director.
"From Des Moines," added George drily, "specialising in small-time tax avoidance schemes."

"…with bad suits, dandruff, and halitosis," added Faye, relishing the chance to layer on extra detail. "Just privileged white men, somewhere on the autistic spectrum, who think they're superheroes. They could just as easily have been serving drinks here tonight."

"Like in *Sliding Doors!"* [58] said George, happy for another chance to show off his encyclopaedic knowledge of mainstream cinema.

"Oddballs with limited social skills. And standing behind them are thousands more just like them—minus the lucky breaks—so we never hear their stories," concluded the Director. "But you don't read *that* in *Time Magazine*."

"…It's just like you were saying before, Sir," reflected George.

"What's that?" asked the Director. After all, he'd said a lot over the past six hours, so he wasn't sure which bit George meant.

"You know—the part about why computers still use crappy Windows software when there are better alternatives out there."

"And that's why we still power our cars with the fossilised remains of tiny sea creatures that died on the ocean floor millions of years ago," added Faye dismissively. "Sooo sophisticated…"

"Precisely!" agreed the Director. "The pair of you really *have* been listening." He patted George and Faye on the shoulders, almost paternally. "But while it's fun to laugh at dysfunctional entrepreneurs and see them for what they are," he continued, steering the conversation back to his thesis, "the one thing we need to be very clear about is that the answers won't come from a specific political ideology.

"As I said before, if we waste time arguing about whether our salvation will be capitalist or socialist, we'll all be dead anyway. So it really won't matter.

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[58] **Sliding Doors** a 1998 romantic comedy—drama starring Gwyneth Paltrow famous for introducing the idea of the 'sliding doors moment' when a seemingly inconsequential action leads to a significant shift in future events. **www.imdb.com**

Those are the kinds of conversations for a dinner party… or over a glass of malt in a late-night bar like this.

"But this isn't that sort of conversation. This isn't even about politics. I'm not a socialist trying to win an argument—I'm just a human trying to stay alive. This is about survival. And trust me, we'd all be quick to discard our political allegiances if there was a gun pointing at our head."

This stark image snapped George back into the present and made him want to focus again.

"I know I've been critical of capitalism today."

"You can say that again," said George, smiling ironically.

"But I hope you can see that my point isn't motivated by politics. I'm not interested in politics. It bores me. It's dull. It's redundant. It doesn't offer us the solutions we need.

"Look—if you're a right-wing, Trump-loving bigot, I may not like you. I might even think you're a bit of a moron. But that doesn't mean I can't co-exist with you.

"What I have more of a problem with is knowing that a Trump supporter's lifestyle is incompatible with a sustainable planet. If we all behave like Trump, everyone dies. Not just the Reds and commies in China. *All of us*. The climate doesn't care how we vote."

He glanced between George and Faye, his tone softening now.

"So—the underlying point of the movie we've just made, and even this conversation I'm having with you now—is all geared towards explaining that idea as simply as I can."

After a few moments of reflection, George paused to consider what the Director had just said and offered: "I guess that explains why the dragon was addicted."

"How's that?" asked the Director, curious to understand what George was getting at.

"I've seen those Trump supporters. They're pretty addicted to whatever brand of Kool-Aid Trump's selling them."

"Exactly so!" exclaimed the Director in a moment of triumph, sensing the penny might have finally dropped.

"Trump supporters are like alcoholics," said George. "They probably know what they're doing breaks the rules, but they want to do it anyway—because they're addicted to the feeling of power and freedom that Trump promises."

"You've hit the nail on the head there, my friend," agreed the Director approvingly.

"Trying to reason with them is pointless—because they're crazy people."

"Exactly," confirmed the Director.

George pressed on, warming to the idea. "It would be like asking a kamikaze pilot not to crash his plane into our ship. He wouldn't listen—he's been brainwashed."

The Director looked at Faye, who met his gaze knowingly, as if to say, *George seems to be having an epiphany.*

"But at least alcoholics usually know they have a problem," George continued, going deeper. "The problem with capitalism is that everything is designed to make us *more* addicted. A capitalist society *encourages* us to believe we can only fit in if we're motivated by money and power!"

"By George, George, I think you've got it!" said the Director, channelling Professor Higgins in *My Fair Lady*, and patting his slumped and ruffled protégé on the back.

7.2. Where Do We Go From Here? (From Ideology to Ontology)

As the emotion from this cathartic moment slowly abated, the three collaborators were left to gather their thoughts—and try to combat the booze, which was now really taking a toll on their mental faculties.

To lighten the mood, Faye leaned over the bar and, for no particular reason, whispered into the Director's ear, "The first rule of *Fight Club* is you don't talk about *Fight Club*."

"And the second rule of *Fight Club* is you don't talk about *Fight Club*," the Director whispered back.

"But the most important rule of *Fight Club* is: *Fuck the rules!*" laughed George loudly, causing the few remaining guests in the bar to glance around, wondering who was yelling expletives at one in the morning.

"Yes, well," said the Director, bemused by George's increasingly erratic behaviour, "be that as it may, what I'm trying to get at here is that—whether you agree with capitalism or not—it's a fact that it's killing us. So I suggest we begin finding genuine solutions as quickly as possible. Solutions that have nothing to do with making money… and everything to do with staying alive."

"Ah ah ah ah, staying alive, staying alive, ah ah ah ah, *staying aliiiiive!*" sang George and Faye together, clearly on the same wavelength—giddy now, and bumping fists at the end of their chorus.

"Well, I'm pleased you find our imminent demise so amusing," muttered the Director in mock annoyance. "But if we want to avoid hitting that iceberg, we need to start doing things very differently."

The three friends nodded in solemn solidarity.

"It's like that thing Einstein said," offered Faye.

"What?" asked George, trying to regain his composure.

"You know, the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result." [59]

"You're right," agreed the Director. "We've got to look seriously at alternative ways to solve this problem—and it *can* still be done. I mean, suppose you'd asked someone 300 years ago whether they should scrap Mercantilism. They'd have almost certainly said *no way*. But then capitalism comes along and, suddenly—*poof!*—Mercantilism is as fashionable as socks with sandals."

"That's a lot like what Buckminster Fuller [60] said," added Faye.

"You're quoting *Buckminster Fuller now!*" exclaimed the Director. "My all-time favourite human being! Wow—you really are the queen of quotations!"

"So what did this Bucking Mister say?" asked George, trying to dampen the growing love-in.

At this, Faye seized the opportunity to show off her knowledge of scientific discovery: "Well, Buckminster Fuller said— *You can never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete.*"

"Damn right!" said the Director, emphatically.

Then, eyeing her with admiration, he added, "But what's someone who quotes Buckminster Fuller off the top of her head working in a bar work at one in the morning?"

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[59] The phrase "The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result" is often attributed to Albert Einstein, but there's no concrete evidence that he actually said or wrote it. It's more likely that this statement originated from 12—step programs or self—help literature. Regardless of its origin, the phrase has become popular as a way to illustrate the concept of repeating unsuccessful actions and expecting different outcomes.

[60] **Buckminster Fuller (**1895 —1983) was an American architect, engineer, inventor, author, and futurist. He is best known for his innovative designs, including the geodesic dome, and for coining the term "Spaceship Earth" to describe his concept of the Earth as a finite and interconnected system that humans must learn to manage sustainably. He advocated for the responsible use of resources and the development of technologies that would benefit all of humanity. **www.bfi.org**

"I'm studying for an MA in Political Science," she confessed. "I work here to pay my student fees. Do you have any idea how much it costs to get through college these days?"
"I know, it's extortionate. I have no idea how you do it," replied the Director, genuinely embarrassed by Britain's education system.
"It's hard," said Faye. "A lot of the time, I fall asleep in lectures."
The Director felt compelled to show support. "When I was at college in the '70s, we got a grant and accommodation—no strings attached, and I could just focus on *why* I was there."
"What, the fornication and alcohol?" asked George playfully.
"That's right," laughed the Director. "And that's another thing that's changed since capitalism undermined the British welfare state. Now it's just another opportunity to extract profits. I feel so sorry for you."
Faye just shrugged and returned to drying her glasses.
"In the '60s and '70s we thought life would just keep improving— moon landings, TVs, cars. By 2024 I think we imagined we'd be on Mars. Instead, things got worse. That's capitalism: like Japanese knotweed strangling our future."
"I guess that's just the way it is…" Faye shrugged again.
George quickly jumped in, sensing this phrase might prompt the Director into another verse of Bruce Hornsby.
"So what are we going to do instead?" he asked, hurriedly.
"An excellent question," replied the Director. "Stick with me, and let's see if we can find the answer. In my book, the solution isn't so much political as it is *ontological*."
The blank expression on George's face told the Director he'd need to back up a little.

"Ontology [61], my friend, refers to questions about the nature of existence. You know—why are we here, where do we come from, what's the purpose of life? That sort of thing."

George nodded, though he still wasn't entirely sure he understood.

"You see," the Director continued, "I believe that if we're going to survive the mess we're in now, we'll have to be brave enough to ask the *Big Questions*. And I mean the *really* big questions, the sort of questions that aren't political at all. At this point, arguing about politics is like arguing over how to arrange the deckchairs on the *Titanic*. We need to think much, much bigger than that. We need to ask how to avoid hitting the iceberg in the first place. *That's* a different order of question altogether."

George still looked puzzled. Over his previous forty-two years on Earth, this wasn't something he'd spent much time worrying about.

"The answer," said the Director, "has to come from a *paradigm shift* [62] in how we see the world—and our place in it."

At this, Faye paused her glass-drying duties and leaned on the bar to listen more intently.

"For example," the Director began, "a long time ago—before we'd even invented telescopes—a guy called Copernicus looked up into the night sky and saw a bright star we now call Jupiter. As he squinted at this light, he noticed specks of light that seemed to hover near the planet, and he speculated

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[61] **Ontology** is a branch of philosophy that deals with the nature of existence, being, and reality. It seeks to understand the nature of reality and the relationships between different entities and serves as a framework for organising our understanding of the world around us, both philosophically and practically.

[62] **A Paradigm Shift** describes a fundamental change in a basic assumption, belief, concept or worldview. It represents a significant departure from the existing norms to a new way of understanding a problem or phenomenon. It was first discussed in Thomas Kuhn's 1962 book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* where he applied it to scientific discovery, but it is now applied to all sorts of incidents where common knowledge suddenly shifts from one assumption to another thanks to new evidence or discovery.
What Is a Paradigm Shift? www.thoughtco.com

that they were its orbiting moons, just like the moon orbiting Earth. And from this observation, he made an extraordinary leap of the imagination. He realised the Earth—*his* Earth—was doing the same thing by orbiting the Sun. And suddenly, in that moment, he had a wild, heretical eureka moment: Earth was *not* the centre of the universe. And if that was true, then maybe Man wasn't the centre of God's plan either.

"And *that*," the Director emphasised, "is what I mean by a paradigm shift. Once you've seen the answer, you can never see things the same way again. It changes everything."

"I used to like those puzzle books," George offered. "You know, with the pictures of ducks or Dalmatians. At first it's just a bunch of splotches—but then you suddenly see the dog… and you can *never unsee it*."

"Exactly," nodded the Director. "And applying that to *our* situation—I'd say realising that capitalism isn't a long-term solution for survival requires the same sort t of paradigm shift which shouldn't be too difficult, after all, Copernicus' great moment of insight effectively killed God, but all we're trying to do is kill Jeff Bezos." (Dear reader, this is a joke. Don't take it literally.)

Faye snorted into her drink at this idea.

George, meanwhile, had become preoccupied with deciding whether he preferred Coke or Pepsi with his Jack.

"But it's hard to see because our hubris keeps getting in the way," the Director continued. "It must be in our DNA, because we've got form on this sort of thing."

"What sort of thing?" asked Faye. "You know—thinking we know best, when we're actually being incredibly foolish.

"Take the Easter Islanders [63], for example—the ones who carved all those giant stone heads. Those carvings—called *moai*—were just the visible part of full statues carved by the *Rapa Nui* people between 1400 and 1650 CE. But this obsession required the islanders to transport the stones using tree trunks and, eventually, they cut down *all* the trees which killed off all the other animals… and ultimately wiped them out too. [64] And for what?"

George shrugged, as if to say, *Don't ask me,* because he still couldn't see how this was relevant.

"You'd think someone might have pointed out that carving hundreds of stone heads was not a brilliant idea, especially as they were running out of trees. But no. They carried on because I suppose those statues were part of a misguided religious belief.

"A bit like *our* religion—where we worship luxury watches and fast cars," suggested Faye, not wishing to miss an opportunity to bash capitalism.

George looked down at his Richard Mille again. It was 2 a.m.

"As I've said several times tonight, having a political debate about whether capitalism or socialism is the best way to get us out of an existential crisis is like arguing over whether the Easter Island stone heads should've had round or square noses. In the grand scheme of things—who gives a shit? Either way, we're all dead. I don't need to persuade you to be a socialist. I just want you to stop doing the thing that's killing me."

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[63] **Easter Islanders**, also known as the Rapa Nui people, are the indigenous Polynesian inhabitants of Easter Island, a remote island located in the southeastern Pacific Ocean. Easter Island is famous for its monumental stone statues called moai carved from volcanic rock, with distinct features and stylised facial expressions, which were carved by the Rapa Nui people between the 13th and 16th centuries. Rapa Nui society flourished for several centuries, but by the late 17th century, it began to decline due to environmental degradation, resource depletion, and internal conflicts.

[64] **New evidence** suggests the society on Rapa Nui did not die out due to environmental degradation, however, several other societies collapsed in a similar same way, including the Mayans, the Khmer of Cambodia, and the Norse Greenland Settlements.

"And there's me thinking you were a Marxist," said Faye, picking a cherry off a cocktail stick with her lips with a satisfied smile.

"Not anymore," replied the Director. "I'm just a regular human these days enjoying life on my little planet, and not wanting it to end any sooner than it has to. Sure, capitalism can't give us what we need anymore, but fighting over what the alternative should be? A total waste of time. We'll just end up fighting each other instead of the climate."

He paused, shifting gears.

"But there's one last thing I do want to mention. You might not know this, but before I wrote the *Dragon* screenplay, I spent a couple of years trying to write a book—an attempt to explain the importance of trust in society.

"I was inspired after the *Great Satsuma* became President the first time around, and suddenly, nobody knew who to believe anymore. Being a sad old adman, I started wondering: can anyone still trust advertising?

"I called the book *Trustonomics*. But eventually, I had to admit that trust in advertising is basically an oxymoron. Advertising can't be trusted—because there's always an ulterior motive. The advertiser is only interested in you so long as you're a potential customer. If you've got no money, they couldn't care less whether you trust them or not—because, to them, you're simply not relevant. And that, in my book, is no definition of trust.

"It's fine if you're aware that this is the game the advertisers are playing, but too many people *do* believe the ads. They're taken in. They believe the shit they're being fed.

"That whole experience got me tugging on the thread of trust, and when I did that, it pulled me down the capitalist rabbit hole. Tug on the thread of trust… and the whole capitalist sweater unravelled—the whole capitalist illusion—and that's how I ended up making films about dragons."

Yet more talk of dragons baffled Faye, but she chose not to interrupt. She figured it would all eventually make sense if she just kept listening.

"But the point I want to make," the Director continued, "is that if we're going to rebuild a new world from the ruins of the old one, we have to learn how to trust again. We've got to remember that other people are more than just potential customers or cynical opportunities to profit.

"And that won't be easy because that's what we've been taught for generations. But if we're to step out of capitalism's controlling mechanisms, we're going to have to set our fears aside and learn how to trust again."

George nodded, swaying a little as he did so, now almost too tired (and definitely too drunk) to stay upright.

"And that's why I was in Bhutan," the Director added. "Researching how other societies work. How they measure success. And that'll be the subject of my next film."

"So," said Faye, narrowing her eyes, "we've established you're obviously not a Marxist."

The Director bowed his head and shook it slowly, side to side.

"And you don't think politics is the answer?"

Again, he shook his head.

"Well then," she said, folding her arms on the bar, "you'd better tell me all about this ontology thing—because otherwise, I'm lost."

"I'm glad *you* said that," echoed George.

7.3. What A Wonderful World

"OK," agreed the Director, taking a deep breath and bracing himself for the challenge. "I can explain it best by giving you a few examples. Let's start with astronauts."

George and Faye exchanged mildly confused glances, which did not go unnoticed.

"Did you know that astronauts often come back from space with something they call the *Overview Effect*?" [65]

George shook his head. He was currently experiencing an overview effect of his own or, more accurately, a *room-spinning-around* effect, thanks to booze.

"It's this overwhelming feeling of being part of the planet—and the planet being part of *you*. It happens when someone sees the Earth from orbit, suspended in the void. As you might imagine, it's incredibly moving. For many of them, it's a profound moment of connection."

"Sounds like Taoism," [66] offered Faye, almost offhand.

The Director gave her a long, sideways look, as if to say *I'll come back to that* —but he was clearly pleased she seemed to know something about that.

"Quite so," he said, then carried on. "When these astronauts return to *terra firma*, they often feel compelled to act on their epiphany. Some set up charities or educational programmes to help the rest of us grasp what they experienced. Edgar Mitchell, from *Apollo 14*, founded an institute to explore the relationship between consciousness and the environment. Mae Jemison, the first African-American woman in space, started a science education

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[65] **The Overview Effect** is a profound shift in awareness reported by astronauts who have viewed the Earth from space. It is characterised by a deep sense of interconnectedness, awe, and a newfound appreciation for the fragility and unity of our planet.
'The Overview Effect' and humanity's connection with Earth www.space.com

[66] **Taoism** is a philosophy and spiritual tradition from ancient China based on the teachings of Lao Tzu who lived around the 6th century BCE. It is centred around the concept of Tao The key principles of which include:
Wu Wei: letting go of striving, forcing, or controlling, and allowing things to unfold naturally.
Yin and Yang: understanding the opposites found in nature and the balance of yin and yang.
Harmony with Nature: the importance of living in harmony with the natural world and an appreciation of its rhythms and cycles.
Inner Cultivation: meditation to achieve harmony with the Tao. **www.bbc.co.uk**

programme for underprivileged communities. Ron Garan set up *Fragile Oasis* [67], a charity promoting international cooperation."

"Sounds cool," said George. "I've got my ticket for that Virgin Galactica thing Branson's selling. Keeps crashing though, so… not so sure now."

The Director rolled his eyes. The thought of being trapped in a spacecraft with Richard Branson conjured unwanted flashbacks of *Alien*. He decided to change the subject.

"Have you ever encountered Carl Sagan?"

George shook his head. The name rang a bell, but he assumed the Director wasn't referring to the Carl Sagan he'd bullied in Year Three.

"He was an astrophysicist," said the Director, "and he wrote a book called *The Pale Blue Dot*." [68]

He fumbled inside his jacket and pulled out a battered old postcard that looked like it had been tucked away for years.

"Sagan was inspired by this photo—taken by Voyager 1 when it was 3.7 billion miles from Earth. Can you see that tiny speck?" He pointed with his stubby finger at what looked like a fleck of dust on the postcard. George nodded. He could just about make out the speck. "That dot is the Earth."

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[67] **www.rongaran.com** - MEET RON GARAN - Former NASA Astronaut & Inspirational Keynote Speaker

[68] **The Pale Blue Dot** refers to a famous photograph of Earth taken by the Voyager 1 spacecraft in 1990, from a distance of about 3.7 billion miles away. In the photograph, Earth appears as a tiny, pale blue speck suspended in space, surrounded by darkness. The image highlights the fragility and insignificance of our planet within the vast cosmos. Pale Blue Dot was later coined by the astronomer Carl Sagan in his book of the same name. The Pale Blue Dot has become an iconic symbol of humanity's place in the universe and a reminder of the importance of preserving and caring for our planet. It serves as a powerful reminder of the interconnectedness of all life on Earth and the need for global cooperation to address environmental challenges. **www.planetary.org**

The Director looked down dramatically as if to gather his thoughts, and then, in the next moment, he looked up to the ceiling. He began to recite what might have been a Shakespearean soliloquy:

"From this distant vantage point, the Earth might not seem of any particular interest. But for us, it's different. Consider again that dot. That's here. That's home. That's us. On it, everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives. Every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilisation, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every mother and father, hopeful child, inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every "superstar," every "supreme leader," every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there — on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam.

Think of the rivers of blood spilt by all those generals and emperors so that, in glory and triumph, they could become the momentary masters of a fraction of a dot. Think of the endless cruelties visited by the inhabitants of one corner of this pixel on the scarcely distinguishable inhabitants of some other corner,

how frequent their misunderstandings, how eager they are to kill one another, how fervent their hatreds.

Our imagined self-importance, the delusion that we have some privileged position in the Universe, is challenged by this point of pale light.

There is perhaps no better demonstration of the folly of human conceits than this distant image of our tiny world. To me, it underscores our responsibility to deal more kindly with one another and to preserve and cherish the pale blue dot, the only home we've ever known."

When he finished, the Director paused, his eyes moist with emotion.

"That quote's from Sagan's book," he said quietly, "and it's what I've been trying to get across all this time, George. This is what we've got to grasp if we're to have any chance of saving ourselves.

"We live on an extraordinary planet. We get this one chance—this miracle of experience. And if we're going to survive, we have to wake up and truly *feel* that truth. It's bigger than politics. Bigger than religion. It's certainly bigger than whether we can afford the down payment on a new car.

"If we don't, we'll wipe ourselves out. And for what?"

His voice trailed off as if vanishing down a long, dark tunnel.

"Reminds me of something Captain Kirk said," George replied.

For a moment, the Director felt hopeless. He'd just delivered perhaps the most profound words of his life, and now George would quote *Star Trek*. Something about seeking out brave new worlds, or some other banal shit… probably.

But that wasn't what George was getting at.

"It was among the strongest feelings of grief I have ever encountered. The contrast between the vicious coldness of space and the warm nurturing of Earth below filled me with overwhelming sadness.

Everybody else was shaking bottles of champagne, but I didn't feel that way at all. I was not celebrating. I was shaking my fists at the gods.

Every day, we are confronted with the knowledge of further destruction of Earth at our hands: the extinction of animal species, of flora and fauna… things that took five billion years to evolve—and suddenly, we will never see them again, because of mankind's interference. It filled me with dread."
The bar fell silent for a beat and it was the Director's turn to be impressed—caught off guard by George's sober eloquence.

7.4. All Together Now

"Well, that's sobered you both up," said Faye, who'd been listening intently.
This was, without doubt, the most fascinating conversation she'd ever had while working behind this bar. Actually, it was the most exciting conversation she'd had *anywhere*, not since her boyfriend had tried to impress her by taking her to a Noam Chomsky lecture called *Manufacturing Consent* [69] (it had worked).
And now here she was, casually chatting with a world-renowned actor and a formidable director, who also, it turned out, was an outspoken socialist. She wasn't going anywhere anytime soon...
But that didn't stop her from asking awkward questions.
"That's very profound—and very, very sad," Faye said, locking eyes with the Director. "And clearly, it's our duty to try and do something about it. But are you seriously telling me that all we need to do to save the planet is just be a

[69] **Manufacturing Consent**: The Political Economy of the Mass Media (1988) is a book by linguist and philosopher Noam Chomsky (co—authored by Edward S. Herman) which describes the role played by mass media in shaping public opinion and influencing political discourse. It argues that mass media outlets, despite their claims of objectivity and impartiality, often serve the interests of powerful political and economic elites. **https://chomsky.info**

little nicer to each other? If you don't mind me saying, that sounds a little... lame. I think Marx would've dismissively called it *Utopian Socialism*." [70]

"What's that?" asked George, now feeling increasingly sidelined by the two political propeller-heads beside him.

"Well," the Director replied, picking up the thread, "back in the 19th century, a bunch of political movements emerged claiming capitalism was inherently bad and that a better, fairer world was just around the corner."

"Not unlike the vision *you're* selling us now," Faye teased.

Choosing to ignore the jab, the Director pressed on. "Robert Owen was a good example. He was a remarkable Welsh mill owner who created his first 'model village' up in Lanarkshire. Later, he took his ideas to the United States and tried to build a utopian society in a place called *New Harmony*.[71]

"Sadly, these grand schemes never stood a chance," the Director continued. "Owen's local competitors saw him as a threat to their access to cheap labour, so they closed ranks and undercut the goods produced by the community. In the end, these little utopian islands of hope were gradually reabsorbed into the wider capitalist marketplace."

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[70] **Utopian Socialism** was a social movement that emerged in the 19th century, advocating the creation of egalitarian societies and cooperative communities where resources were shared and individuals lived in harmony with one another and with nature. Key figures associated include Robert Owen, Charles Fourier, and Henri de Saint—Simon, who proposed various models for organising society based on principles of solidarity, mutual aid, and collective ownership of property. While utopian socialism failed to trigger widespread social change they contributed to ongoing debates about the possibility of more just and humane societies.
Utopian Socialism: Origin, Characteristics, Experiments **www.sociologygroup.com**

[71] **New Harmony**, Indiana was established in 1814 as a German utopian community by led by Johann Georg Rapp. In 1825, the community sold the town to Robert Owen. Under Owen's leadership, New Harmony attracted intellectuals, scientists, and social reformers from around the world, becoming a centre for innovation and communal living. However, internal conflicts and financial difficulties led to the dissolution of the experiment by the late 1820s. Despite its short—lived existence, New Harmony remains a symbol of idealistic experimentation, communal living and social reform.
New Harmony by Katharine Dos Passos and Edith Shay **www.theatlantic.com**

"So what's to stop the GRiFTers from squashing *your* ideas the same way they squashed Robert Owen's?" asked George, genuinely intrigued—and, for the first time, a little concerned.

"Another good question," replied the Director. "Well, as I've said before, I'm hoping that a clear explanation of how we got into this mess will mobilise not just the working class, but the middle class as well. And once we've got the middle class on board, the GRiFTers will have no one left to sell their products to. Nowhere to go. And we'll do to them what they did to *New Harmony*."

"And when that happens," he added, "capitalism as we know it will simply fade away."

"I hope you're right," said Faye, trying to believe him—but unable to hide the scepticism in her voice.

Noting her doubt, the Director continued, "I've also got a couple of other ideas that might help speed up the process."

"Really?" she asked, raising an eyebrow. "Because this still feels like a bit of a long shot."

"Will you allow me to describe them?"

"Be our guest," replied George, swaying as he looked to Faye for backup—and almost falling off his chair in the process.

"The first thing we have in our favour is *Spontaneous Order*," said the Director, warming up again. "If we can collectively agree that we're on the road to self-destruction—and that we'd *prefer* not to go down in flames—then we might just decide, as a species, to do something about it. Like the starlings or the sardines fending off a shared threat.

"It won't rely on someone being in charge. No rulebook, no manifesto. We'll just take matters into our own hands and act. Independently—but somehow, together. And if that happens, it might go viral. It might grow into a global movement because, after all, it's a global crisis. I don't think there'll be any

turning back once we've all uploaded these viral ideas into our *Collective Unconscious* [72].

"Ur?" slurred George, worried he might have had a micro-nap and missed something. "The collective *what*?"

"Ah, yes! I should have mentioned that earlier," said the Director, briefly lighting up at the thought of being able to describe a concept that was close to his heart. "It's an idea that came from Carl Jung, back when he was studying different cultures. He kept noticing the same symbols, stories, and archetypes in completely separate parts of the world—often from vastly different times and places."

He leaned in slightly. "So, he concluded there must be some kind of shared memory bank. A *Collective Unconscious* that connects us all on a deeper, unconscious level."

George blinked slowly, trying to keep up.

"And I believe," continued the Director, now fully in flow, "that once enough people realise how dangerous free-market dragon capitalism is to our survival, we'll upload that awareness into the Collective Unconscious—like a kind of viral update. And that will trigger a moment of shared awakening. A spontaneous, global response. No manifesto. No revolution. Just… consensus."

Faye tilted her head, intrigued.

"It'll be like slipping a virus into the capitalist software. Once it's in there, it'll start infecting the system—until it crashes entirely. Just like when they had to

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[72] **The Collective Unconscious** is a concept developed by the Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung, referring to a layer of the unconscious mind shared by all human beings, that serves as a reservoir of shared human experiences and wisdom that transcends individual consciousness. According to Jung, the collective unconscious influences individual development, cultural and religious beliefs, artistic expressions, and societal norms.
Carl Jung's Collective Unconscious Theory: What It Suggests About the Mind
www.verywellmind.com

shut HAL down in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, after it began to threaten the crew."

"Yeah," mumbled George, eyes half-closed, "but that scene freaked me out. And what was that black oblong thing all about?"

Choosing to ignore this question, the Director continued. "If we stick with the computer analogy, this collective unconscious is like a kind of memory storage in the cloud that we unknowingly access and draw on. Perhaps another name for it might be the Zeitgeist. Maybe starlings know how to fly in those intricate patterns because they share the same collective unconscious programme. We'll never know—but it's fun to speculate.

"The biologist Rupert Sheldrake came up with a similar idea he calls morphic resonance, and the French philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin [73] believed that individuals can share information and ideas at an unconscious level.

"For example, think about that Nirvana album cover with the baby swimming underwater."

"*Nevermind*," replied George.

"No, I think this is a good example of our collective survival mechanism," insisted the Director. "A vital tool we'll need if we're going to escape capitalist annihilation."

"*Nevermind*," repeated George. "That's the name of the Nirvana album my dad used to play." [74]

[73] **Teilhard De Chardin** (1881—1955) author of The Human Phenomenon and The Divine Milieu, was a Christian mystic and thinker who applied the Christian gospel to developments in modern science and evolution. **https://www.teilhard.org.uk**

[74] **Nevermind** album cover shot by photographer Kirk Weddle

"Ah! Quite so!" accepted the Director, now realising what George was getting at. "Isn't it weird how babies remain serene and don't panic when submerged in water? I'd say that's an example of the collective unconscious. We subconsciously share important survival information as part of our programming."

"So when we seed into our collective unconscious the idea that capitalism is killing us, critical mass will be achieved, and spontaneous order will kick in. And when that happens, we'll miraculously see how our best hope of survival comes from cooperating, rather than competing, with each other."

Faye listened carefully to all of this, trying hard to keep an open mind. Everything she'd learned through the Hegelian dialectic of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis made her want to scream, *THIS IS SUPERSTITIOUS BULLSHIT!* But, for fear of upsetting her guests, she kept her counsel. Instead, she said: "And when that happens, I suppose capitalism will collapse, just as Marx predicted. Only, if your theory is right, it won't be because the working class withheld their labour—but because the middle class withheld their consumption. Oh, the irony!"

"I have to admit, it's an amusing thought," agreed the Director, smiling in appreciation of Faye's astute analysis, even if he sensed she hadn't entirely bought into all of his ideas yet.

"OK," said George, hoping to speed things along so he could get some sleep. "Any other ideas before we turn in for the night?"

"Funny you should ask," replied the Director keenly. "As a matter of fact, I have one more card up my sleeve."

"Why am I not surprised?" replied George, becoming increasingly monosyllabic. "Come on then, let's hear it."

"Well," proceeded the Director, "it's this idea that if our best hope of survival is the pursuit of *Mutual Enlightened Self-Interest*—which I somewhat

playfully call *MESI* [75] —I hope you don't mind if this all now starts to get a bit *new age* and *woo-woo*."

"You're telling us this will be even more woo-woo than *Spontaneous Order* and the *Collective Unconscious*?" asked Faye, concerned she wouldn't be able to contain her inner Hegel for much longer.

"I know!" chuckled the Director, aware he was asking a lot of his audience. "This is difficult to imagine when our minds are so conditioned to be rational and pragmatic—but stick with me. Would it help to remind you that the whole point of the capitalist hegemony is to keep us *rational,* because we're easier to control if we don't think outside the box."

Faye thought about this for a moment and had to admit the Director was probably right—at least about that.

"You see," began the Director again, "the GRiFTers would like us to see the world as orderly and predictable, making it easier for them to manage and monetise it. However, I'm suggesting that the world isn't orderly, linear, and predictable at all. It's a very *MESI* place. Like it or not, it doesn't conform to the neat *Newtonian* model of physics, which assumes the world can be divided into nice little packets of 'stuff' that can be measured and sold.

"Instead, we live in a more *Quantum* universe—fluid and mysterious. A place where space and time are not what they seem. It's the difference between classical and quantum computers: one uses electrical impulses like a telephone exchange, while the other plays at a subatomic level where electrons exist as both particles *and* waves, meaning they can be in two places at the same time. Which, of course, breaks the laws of physics as we know them."

"Even though Einstein thought this was spooky, lots of experiments have since proven that this *is* how the universe actually works. As Niels Bohr put it:

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[75] **MESI** — (an acronym I invented — Ed.) An invitation to consider the world as too complex and interconnected to be broken into component parts. Literally beyond the understanding of human intellect and therefore a concept that can only be experienced as an act of faith which leads to harmony, contentment and empathy with all of life.

Anyone who isn't shocked by quantum theory doesn't understand it [76] , and he should know, since he more or less discovered it.

"All of which is far too complicated to go into at two o'clock in the morning, but this is real."

"And this is important to our survival, why?" asked George.

"It's important for our survival because the more we embrace the concept of a quantum universe, the less capitalism is either applicable or relevant.

"Take the debate around Artificial Intelligence, for example. If the hype is to be believed, AI breaks the rules of capitalism because it will put huge numbers of people out of work. Humans will simply become surplus to requirements—and if that's the case, what happens next? At that point, we have to ask whether the system is working for us or if we are working for the system.

"And right now, the GRiFTers have no answers to that question. Or maybe they do—but they're just not telling us.

"You see, capitalism is a predictable algorithm. But the universe we live in is *MESI*—and we'll have to learn to be far more flexible and *MESI* ourselves if we want to evolve and survive within it.

"The current system requires the capitalists to remain in control—but that, quite simply, doesn't work for the rest of us.

"We can't always be in control of what's happening around us, but what we *can* do is be much more relaxed about not being in control. We've got to learn to go with the flow and help each other along the way. We need to learn to trust the universe—as well as the people we share it with.

"All of which will mean we survive the climate crisis *and* get more out of life in the bargain."

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[76] **Niels Bohr** (1885— 1962) was a Danish physicist who made significant contributions to our understanding quantum mechanics. His most notable achievement was the Bohr model of the atom, proposed in 1913. When Bohr first published his findings, Albert Einstein called it "musicality in the sphere of thought. If all this is true, then it means the end of physics." **https://interestingengineering.com**

"Yeah," said George approvingly. "You mentioned this already—when you said that people who look after other people end up feeling happier."
"Exactly!" affirmed the Director. "A powerful connection links acts of kindness with feeling happy. When we help someone else, our brain releases a little chemical reward for our good deed."
"Dopamine and endorphins," confirmed Faye sagely.
"That's right," agreed the Director. "Those little 'feel-good' chemicals in our brains that reward us for doing good."
"So it really *is* better to give than receive!" George said, now smiling and feeling more optimistic.
"And when we help each other and experience that happiness, it creates a positive feedback loop—meaning the more we give, the more likely we are to keep giving. What's more, kindness gives us a sense of purpose, lowers our stress levels, makes us less neurotic, and boosts our well-being in ways that no amount of cars, watches, or handbags ever could. And it's free! That's something capitalism can't compete with. Capitalism thrives on financial transactions—but it has no place in a world where people help each other just because they want to."
"Tell me about it," replied George, sounding sanguine. "I pay my therapist a fortune to tell me I'm neurotic. So where do I sign up?"
"Hold on," said Faye, not wishing to rain on the Director's parade, "I still have one last lingering doubt."
"What's that?" asked the Director. "Let's see if I can reassure you."
"Well, I more or less buy into your views on capitalism, and I certainly agree we need to find a different way—because the direction we're heading in is going to kill us. It's just that I'm afraid nothing I do can really make much difference. Most of the time, I feel like I'm up against the whole world—that I'm just a bartender, and I need this job. If I do what you suggest, I might lose this salary. And if I do that… I won't graduate or pay back my student loan."

"I hear you," the director replied sympathetically. We all feel vulnerable when challenging the status quo, especially when it threatens our livelihoods."
At that exact moment, George raised both hands in surprised enlightenment. "I get it!" he shouted, pointing at Faye. "You're the hummingbird!"
"I am?" replied Faye, genuinely confused.
"Yes!" confirmed George. "My niece told me about this during a Zoom call the other night."
"Please explain," pleaded the Director, equally nonplussed.
"OK," began George. *"One day, a fire started in the rainforest, causing all the jungle animals to panic and run away from the flames. But, as they reached the river's edge, they saw a tiny hummingbird flying in the other direction.*
'Where are you going, little hummingbird?' asked the panther.
'I'm putting out the fire!' the hummingbird replied breathlessly, gathering two more drops of water in her tiny beak.
'Don't bother,' said the snake. 'There's nothing you can do. Your beak is so small, and the fire is so hot—you might get burned.'
The hummingbird didn't answer; she was too busy taking water from the river to the fire. She repeated this all afternoon until the monkey begged her to stop.
'Dear hummingbird, you are courageous but also very small, and your tiny beak cannot put out the fire alone. Why don't you stop?'
To which the hummingbird replied, 'Because I'm doing what I can.' [77]
"That's exactly what I'm talking about!" cheered the Director, pointing at George and patting him firmly on the shoulder. "And I'm saying that if we all do what we can—even if it doesn't seem like much on its own—collectively, we can make a real difference."

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[77] **The Forest Fire and The Hummingbird** originates from the story told by **Wangari Maathai (1940 — 2011),** a Kenyan environmentalist and political activist. Maathai often shared this parable to convey the importance of taking action, no matter how small, in the face of overwhelming challenges such as environmental degradation or social injustice. She was awarded the Nobel Prize: "for her contribution to sustainable development, democracy and peace" **www.nobelprize.org**

"Oooh! Oooh!" exclaimed Faye, as though she'd just remembered something, before spinning around to look under the bar.

George assumed that talking about rainforests had prompted Faye to make monkey noises.

Meanwhile, the Director continued his point. "Some people will think we're mad for trying to make a difference, but what's the alternative? Should we just give up and watch the planet burn? You might be willing to do that—but I'm certainly not giving up. I won't sugarcoat this, George, but we've all got to decide where we stand. We can continue to be part of the problem, or realise our only hope is to be part of the solution."

"Do I have to make that choice now?" asked George, concerned—he was having trouble staying awake.

Faye then returned, holding a scrap of paper and a calculator like a schoolgirl hoping to earn a house point. The Director paused to let her speak.

"On average, a hummingbird's beak holds seven millilitres of water," she said excitedly. "And there are about eight billion people on Earth."

"Go on," said the Director, now guessing where she was going with this.

"Well, let's assume there's a hummingbird for every person, which means eight billion hummingbirds."

"OK," said George, joining in.

"That means eight billion hummingbirds would be able to carry the equivalent of 56 million litres of water per trip—and if each hummingbird made three trips a day, that would come to about 168 million litres, or, if you prefer, 67 Olympic-sized swimming pools!" concluded Faye, very pleased with herself, slapping both hands on the bar.

"That'll soon put the fire out!" said George triumphantly.

"Quite so!" said the Director. "Especially if we do it day after day for the rest of our lives. You've made my point perfectly, Faye. Thank you."

"And that doesn't even include the jaguars, monkeys or snakes joining in!" said George, at which the Director and bartender smiled at each other, amused.
"But it doesn't work if none of us are willing to be the first hummingbird," the Director added, more seriously now.
"And that answers your question, George: Yes, you have to make your choice right now—because if you leave it until tomorrow, the forest will have burned down. But I do have some final thoughts that might give you hope."
"What are they?" asked George, seek still more good news.

7.5. With a Little Help from My Friends

"Look, I understand your feelings of helplessness," said the Director sympathetically. "Sometimes, I wake up at night and wonder whether I'm going mad—because everyone else seems to think capitalism is perfectly normal."
"I mean, we grow up believing our parents know what they're talking about when they say they want us to do well and get a good career. Then we go to school and assume our teachers must have the answers—or they wouldn't be standing at the front, telling us what's supposedly true. After that, we get a job and take for granted that our bosses must be cleverer than we are—because they're more successful than we are. Then, when we get home, we turn on the television and listen to politicians confidently stringing coherent sentences together, and we at least hope they know what they're talking about. After all, they're the ones driving the bus."
"So the world *seems* like a sensible place that has our best interests at heart—if we all just buckle down, work hard, and pay our taxes."
"So when I wake up with that uncomfortable feeling that things don't seem quite right, I find it hard to tell if the problem is with them or with me—after all, there are many more of them than there are of me. But after 25 years of

examining this problem, I've come to the conclusion that the people in charge don't have a Scooby Doo about what's really going on. Most of them are just following the rules they were taught, doing what's expected, and not asking too many questions for fear of seeming odd."

"The Hegemony," confirmed Faye, in a deadpan, matter-of-fact tone.

"The Hegemony," echoed George, equally deadpan.

"The Hegemony," agreed the Director, nodding. "We just keep taking the Blue Pill. So allow me to offer the same crumbs of comfort I fall back on when I start to doubt myself."

"Please do," said George, looking for emotional support in addition to the physical support he needed to remain upright.

"Well, first off," began the Director, in his most avuncular tone, "there are plenty of examples where—probably to Adam Smith's great surprise—altruistic societies that weren't driven by money flourished."

"Enlighten us!" said Faye.

"OK—so you might think, for example, that the Spartans [78] were just a bunch of loin-clothed macho weirdos. Yet they were also the most successful city-state in Ancient Greece for over 700 years, which is about twice as long as the British Empire lasted. The Spartans were far more interested in the well-being of their fellow citizens than in personal wealth or materialism. Each Spartan was allotted an equal portion of land, which they farmed collectively to prevent wealth disparities. They also ate together and shared necessities, which fostered camaraderie and discouraged individual excess."

"Sure, Sparta wasn't perfect. They were a military state that kept slaves, but let's not allow that to spoil the point I'm trying to make: you don't need to be driven by individual wealth to be a prosperous society.

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[78] **The Spartans** were ancient Greeks renowned for their disciplined lifestyle and formidable warriors. **www.worldhistory.org**

"Something similar happened in 12th-century Japan, where Bushido [79] values like loyalty, respect, integrity, and compassion were considered more important than personal glory.

"And, as I've already said, indigenous societies—like those in Australia and North America—emphasised shared values and collective well-being. In his book *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* David Graeber, recounts an anecdote originally told by the explorer Peter Freuchen. He described how, after an unsuccessful walrus hunt, a hunter comes home hungry but is given several hundred pounds of meat by a hunter who'd had more success. When the recipient thanks the giver profusely, the giver objects indignantly, saying:

Up in our country we are human! And since we are human we help each other. We don't like to hear anybody say thanks for that. What I get today you may get tomorrow. [80] And while we're discussing North America, there's a wonderful quote from a Sioux teacher named Lame Deer, who wrote a book called *Lame Deer, Seeker of Visions* [81], in which he gently takes the piss out of the 'civilised' Europeans who took over his land. He said something along the lines of: 'We were too uncivilised to place great importance on private property. When someone couldn't afford a horse, a tent, or a blanket, he would receive them all as a gift. We don't use money, so their wealth doesn't determine their worth as a person. I don't know how we managed without the essential aspects necessary for a civilised society.'"

"It's a sad but funny book. Look it up if you get a chance."

"Who says Americans don't get irony!" said George, without a hint of irony.

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[79] **Bushido** was a samurai warriors code of conduct rooted in Confucianism, Buddhism, and Shinto amongst others, emphasising loyalty, honour, self—discipline, and bravery.
The Bushido Code **www.thoughtco.com**

[80] **Debt: The First 5,000 Years** by David Graeber **www.goodreads.com**

[81] **https://en.wikipedia.org/ Lame Deer** - *Lame Deer, Seeker of Visions,* (1972), Simon and Schuster - Recorded interviews with Lame Deer that recounts his life and provides insight into his belief in the power of ritual in life

"So it's just not true that society has to be driven by the selfish love of money. The more I think about it, the more it seems we've allowed ourselves to believe that a *dog-eat-dog* existence is preferable to empathy, shared values, and cooperation. And the bizarre thing is, I don't think we're half as selfish, mean, or nasty as we're told. That's just another capitalist ruse. Given half a chance, most of us are kind and generous—we'd happily give up our seat on the bus for an elderly passenger or help a homeless person when we can."

"Would you mind if I tell you one of my favourite little stories about Prince Peter Kropotkin, George?"

"The Russian dude?" asked George, scrambling back through his recent mental notes, which were now scattered all over the place. "Be my guest."

"OK. Kropotkin *was* a Russian, but while living in England, he became a great admirer of the *Royal National Lifeboat Institution—the RNLI*—which he thought was a brilliant example of *Mutual Aid*. In 1902, there were more than three hundred lifeboats stationed around the coasts of Britain, and Kropotkin reckoned there would have been a lot more if the fishermen who provided the service hadn't been so poor themselves. All the crews were volunteers, just as they are today, and, as he said, they were ready to sacrifice their lives to rescue strangers—again, just as they do today. And every year, many of them drown in their efforts to save people they don't know and will never meet.

After a shipwreck in Kent that had claimed a sailor's life, Kropotkin spoke with the last coastguard to be found, after spending the night buried in a snowdrift on the beach. He asked him why they'd risked their lives in such a fierce storm, and the coastguard explained that the villagers had stood on the shore for two hours, watching as the crew clung to the broken mast of the ship. Then, in a moment's pause in the gale, they thought they heard the cry of a boy begging for help.

"*It was at that moment that we could stand it no longer,*" said the lifeboatman. "*All at once, we decided. We must go. We must try.*" [82]

The Director completed the story as if channelling the brave sailor.

"You see, George, we have it within us to be magnificent. And yet we're forced to conform to a shitty system that squeezes that magnificence out of us. And despite being exploited by it, many of us are still willing to put our live at risk to provide a service that capitalism chooses to ignore because there is no financial gain to be made from it. So we do these noble things in our spare time—when we aren't earning a living... And, incidentally, isn't *earning a living* a horrible phrase? It makes us sound as though we have to justify our existence.

"Let me tell you: nobody should have to earn a living. Being alive isn't something we have to earn; it's a gift, and no one should be allowed to take that from us.

"And if it hadn't been for Adam fucking Smith and his misplaced faith in the ruling classes, we might now be living in a much kinder world, instead of being trapped in some sort of death cult. But it isn't too late. We can't rewind the last two hundred years, but we *can* start a new chapter of compassion for each other and stop stoking the capitalist furnace.

"And if we do that, the fire will go out... and the dragon will die."

[82] **Life—Boats and Anarchy — http**

8: The Elevator Pitch – MOVE ON UP

8.1. Cloudbusting

"And that's more or less all I have to say," concluded the Director, with a hint of relief and finality in his voice. "I've reminded you just how dangerous the climate crisis is. I've explained why we must stop being complacent and why we've got to change our behaviour if we want to avoid environmental Armageddon.

"I've also identified the source of the problem—namely, a social system that places profits over human well-being—and explained why capitalism is no longer fit for purpose."

George, remembered all of this conversation, and the physical and mental distance he'd traveled to get here, and nodded.

"I then described some alternatives to capitalism and why we've got to start exploring them before it's too late. And finally, I tried to create a sense of urgency—to impress upon you that we can't wait for someone else to take the

initiative. It's incumbent upon all of us to become *hummingbirds* ourselves. So, that's it! My work here is done. Now, off you go…" The Director gave a little bow, feeling lightheaded with relief.

"That's fantastic, sir, and thank you so much for explaining it all to me," said George, who, despite feeling physically and mentally exhausted, was genuinely grateful for what the Director had done for him.

"I agree," said Faye, who, despite being a paid-up socialist and already politically active, had to admit she'd been challenged to think about these problems from a slightly less political angle. But she had one last request.

"Before you go, can I first say I love your movies? And secondly, what should I do next? I mean, what can I do when I go to college tomorrow? What can I do to start being a *hummingbird*? It all seems like such an enormous task."

The Director could hear the genuine urgency in Faye's voice, so while he sincerely wanted to finish his drink, help George to the elevator, and head home to his wife, he instead said:

"I understand what you're saying, Faye, I do. So here's the deal: Call me a cab for about thirty minutes from now—not an Uber [1], of course, because they're a classic, exploitative GRiFTer organisation—but a local cab company. And in return, I'll suggest what you can do tomorrow to start changing the world."

"It's a deal," said Faye, taking the napkin the Director had written his address on and reaching for her phone.

Meanwhile, George, still perched on the comfy bar stool beside him, was finding it hard to keep his eyes open. This might have been the cue to turn in for the night and return to the subject another day. Instead, however, the

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[1] **Uber** is a multinational taxi company founded in 2009, known for its mobile app that connects passengers with drivers. It revolutionised the transportation industry but also faced criticism as a pioneer of the 'gig economy'. These include its treatment of drivers / lack of insurance / paid leave / workers' rights / low pay / long hours / lack of background checks / unethical business practices / aggressive expansion strategies / controversial marketing tactics / allegations of corporate misconduct — amongst other things… **www.theguardian.com**

Director was hit by one last burst of adrenaline, like a marathon runner entering the stadium for the race's final lap.

"So, if you still think we can't kill a dragon as big and powerful as capitalism, let me tell you—it's been done many times before. Progress only happens when an evil dragon is put to the sword."

"Like Copernicus and his BIG IDEA?" asked George, suddenly jolting into life and rubbing his face to wake himself up.

"Yes, just like Copernicus," agreed the Director.

"Copernicus, the Dragon Slayer—that's got a ring to it," said Faye, thinking it sounded like something from *Game of Thrones*.

"Dragons as big as capitalism have been killed before, and they'll be killed again. If you apply enough pressure to their throat, you eventually choke them to death."

"Examples?" asked Faye, cradling her chin in expectation.

"Well, I've got three good case studies where a small but determined group took on the Establishment and won emancipation. Want to hear about them?"

"What's emancipation?" asked George. "Is it like constipation?"

"Actually, in a way, it is," chuckled the Director. "I mean, in all three of my examples, there's a few hard-to-move shits blocking progress. But seriously, emancipation simply means setting people free. In other words: liberation."

George made a droopy 'OK' sign with his fingers to show he understood.

"Take the *Transatlantic Slave Trade,*" [2] offered the Director. "That stain on the collective human conscience persisted for 200 years and made a lot of capitalists very, very wealthy."

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[2] **The Transatlantic Slave Trade** was a horrific system of human trafficking which, over four centuries, forcibly transported millions of Africans across the Atlantic Ocean to the Americas to serve as enslaved labour, leaving a lasting legacy of trauma and injustice that continues to impact societies today. **Transatlantic Slave Trade Overview** **www.bbc.co.uk**

Yet, in the end, it was killed off by a small group of determined activists, so disgusted by how we were treating fellow humans that they wouldn't take no for an answer."

"Interesting," agreed George, thinking this sounded more like a story he could follow. "Tell us more."

The Director gathered his thoughts, took a deep breath, and began. "OK. *The Transatlantic Slave Trade* started in the early years of the 16th century. Over the next 200 years, around 17 million Africans were transported to North and South America and the Caribbean. In addition, millions more were killed during their capture, and two million died in transit."

"Fuck," said George. Faye nodded in agreement.

"The British didn't start the slave trade, but boy, did they cash in once they realised just how much money could be made from capturing humans and shipping them off to the other side of the world. In the end, Britain was responsible for around half of the enslaved people transported, which, in turn, accounted for about 10% of the entire British economy at the time. Think about that, if you ever wonder the lengths to which capitalism allows men to pursue profit."

Both George and Faye shook their heads in disbelief and disgust.

"But gradually, thanks to the work of a small group of hummingbirds"—here the Director nodded in George's direction in acknowledgement of his earlier contribution—"known as *abolitionists* [3], it became too difficult to ignore this obscenity. The 'legal' transportation of human cargo was formally ended with the passing of the *Abolition of the Slave Trade Act* in 1807. The United States followed suit the next year."

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[3] **British Abolitionists** were a dedicated group that campaigned tirelessly against the slave trade through grassroots activism such as petitions, rallies, literature, and public lectures which consistently pressured policymakers to take action — culminating in the Slave Trade Act in 1807. They were led by figures such as William Wilberforce, Thomas Clarkson, Granville Sharp, and Olaudah Equiano. A similar group in the US was lead by figures such as Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, William Lloyd Garrison, and Sojourner Truth.

The *Abolitionists* famously included William Wilberforce and Josiah Wedgwood, both affiliated with the Quaker movement and, therefore, motivated by more than just making money. Part of Wedgwood's contribution was to create a ceramic medallion of an African in chains, inscribed with the slogan *Am I not a man and a brother?* Supporters wore them around their necks, much like we wear *Just Stop Oil* t-shirts today. (Here's an image of the medallion for viewers at home.)

"And I bet the *Establishment* were just as dismissive of Wilberforce and Wedgwood back then as they are about the *Just Stop Oil* activists today," suggested Faye.

"I'm sure you're right," agreed the Director. "And even then, the slave ships kept operating illegally for another sixty years, which just shows how hard it is to force capitalism to let go of something when it's making money."

"But the interesting thing I want you to note here is something called the *Overton Window*." [4]

"Ah, yes, I wrote an essay about that last term," said Faye approvingly.

"What's this then?" asked George, feeling he might be thrown out of that window if he didn't stay awake.

"Well," explained the Director, "the *Overton Window* is a sort of snapshot of how the public feels about a particular subject at any one moment in time. The slave trade, for example, was considered acceptable when it first began in the 1600s. But by the early 1900s—thanks to people like Wilberforce and Wedgwood—the idea of trading human lives had become so abhorrent that British politicians had no choice but to act.

"And that's how change comes about. You move the Overton Window by educating and informing. What seems impossible at the outset becomes reality if enough people apply enough pressure to shift the window. And that's how we can abolish capitalism, too."

The Director was encouraged to see George and Faye giving this some thought, so he pressed on.

"So let's think of a different example of something that once seemed impossible to change, before it was finally consigned to the dustbin of capitalist history."

"OK," agreed George, wanting to hear more.

"Let's look at how ordinary folk in Britain finally won the right to vote."

"Classic example!" agreed Faye, settling down for a good listen.

"Three hundred years ago, the British Establishment considered the working class too irresponsible—and, frankly, too stupid—to be consulted about how their lives should be lived. But, of course, there was another reason…"

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[4] **The Overton Window** represents the range of ideas and policies that are considered politically mainstream at any given time. The window can shift over time as societal attitudes, political leadership, media influence, and grassroots activism changes public opinion. **https://conceptually.org**

"The people with all the power and money didn't want to give any of it away to undeserving factory workers—who they more or less considered a lower life form."
"Just like how our Dragon saw Alice and me!" observed George.
"You're catching on!" smiled the Director.
"It took over a century of protests before the landed gentry finally agreed to give up some of their power."
"And there's plenty of toffs out there who still haven't come to terms with it," added Faye ruefully.
"Too true," agreed the Director. "It's crazy to think it was only 200 years ago when only wealthy men were allowed to have a say in how the country was run. What's more, because they were wealthy, most had very little interest in the poor, whom they simply saw as a resource from which to make profits."
"So what's new?" asked Faye.
"In 1819, working conditions had become so bad in the industrialised cities of the North that 60,000 factory workers demonstrated to ask for better treatment and political reform. The Establishment was more than a little concerned, as they'd seen something similar happen in France thirty years earlier, which resulted in a lot of wealthy heads becoming basket cases. So, rather than take that risk, they called in the army. Eighteen demonstrators were killed, and over 700 were severely injured."
"Peterloo…" [5] confirmed Faye, solemnly shaking her head.
"That's the one," nodded the Director. "Which put the working class back in their box for a while."
"Bastards," muttered George quietly to himself.

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[5] **The Peterloo Massacre** of 1819 was a pivotal event in British history and remains a symbol of the struggle for democracy, social justice, and the right to peaceful protest. **The Peterloo massacre: what was it and what did it mean? www.theguardian.com**

"Then, after a pause of about 20 years, during which working conditions got even worse, a grassroots movement called the *Chartists* [6] sprang up. It didn't have leaders or a manifesto, so in that respect, it was a great example of *Spontaneous Order*. Yet it managed to organise a nationwide petition of several million signatures, which it delivered to Parliament."

"Wow – good on them!" said George appreciatively. "Again, just like Alice and George."

"That's right—and just like Alice and George, they were completely ignored," said the Director.

"So they organised a second petition, and then another one… and they were all ignored."

"Bastards," repeated George.

"And eventually, the movement fizzled out due to lack of progress."

"Shame," said George, genuinely saddened.

"Nonetheless," continued the Director, back in full lecture mode, "in 1867, voting rights were extended—fractionally—to include men renting property for £10 or more a year."

"Jeez — big deal," said George. "And women?"

Faye, who knew this story well, shook her head.

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[6] **The Chartists** were a working—class movement that campaigned for political reform and the expansion of democratic rights. They advocated for a People's Charter, which demanded universal male suffrage, secret ballots, equal electoral districts, and other democratic reforms. They organised mass meetings, rallies, and petitions.
The Chartist Movement 1838 — 1848 **www.bbc.co.uk**

"So next, at the turn of the twentieth century, came the suffragettes," [7] resumed the Director enthusiastically, as if he'd just seen the cavalry riding over the hill. "They were led by women like Emmeline Pankhurst who were not about to put up with any shit. The *Suffragettes* vandalised public buildings, went on hunger strike and threw themselves under racehorses".

"You could say they made a royal nuisance of themselves." quipped Faye, winking to acknowledge such a terrible joke.

"Like *Extinction Rebellion* does today," noted George.

"That's right! And, after another 20 years of this sort of wide-scale civil disobedience, the efforts of these brave women finally paid off: In 1918, men AND women who'd fought in the *Great War* were allowed to vote and, in 1928, *ALL* men and women were finally included."

"Jeez, it's like pulling teeth!" said George, unimpressed with the effort required to get *The Establishment* to change anything. "It reminds me of watching those *penny-falls* machines in amusement arcades," he reflected dreamily. "It takes a hell of a lot of pressure pushing those pennies forward, pennies before they finally drop over the edge."

"Quite so," agreed the Director. "It took a long time, but eventually, the pennies dropped.

"To be fair, if we must," added Faye reluctantly, knowing something about this subject. "For a Victorian, *democracy* would have seemed an alien concept. After all, the most recent example they'd have been able to refer to was that of Ancient Greece, three thousand years earlier!"

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[7] **Suffragettes** were a determined group of women who fought for women's right to vote in the late 19th and early 20th centuries employing bold and militant tactics to demand the vote and equality. Their actions, including window—smashing, arson, and chaining themselves to railings, challenged societal norms and sparked public debate about the rights of women. Despite facing opposition, ridicule, and even imprisonment, the Suffragettes persevered, and their efforts ultimately contributed to the passage of the Representation of the People Act in 1918, granting some women in the UK the right to vote.
Who were the suffragettes? www.museumoflondon.org.uk

"You're right!" agreed the Director magnanimously. "It's easy to forget what a novelty democracy would have seemed back then. And, in a way, that's exactly the situation our politicians now find themselves in. They have no idea what a post-capitalist system might look like, as there are no obvious examples to compare it with. And, of course, the GRiFTers would much prefer it if we didn't bother thinking about it at all. Which is why we're trying to open up the debate with our Dragon movie."

"History's a wonderful thing," observed George, reflecting on what he'd learned in the last ten minutes.

"But only if we learn," warned Faye, "otherwise, we'll keep repeating it."

"And, as I've already said, it'll be written by the victors," added the Director with a hint of finality. "Only this time, there won't be any victors."

George lowered his head and made a sad, groaning noise.

"But while we're on the subject of history, there's one more example of a dragon-slaying I'd like to tell you about."

"Go on," said George, unsure whether he could handle any more information but too enervated to resist.

"OK, I will. But I want to tell you about this one because the specific strategy they used might be something we can learn from."

"Sounds helpful," agreed Faye, a little more intrigued—and much less drunk—than George.

"I'm talking about Gandhi's strategy for evicting the British from India."

"Oooh! Now I *am* interested in this!" proclaimed George, suddenly energised. "Ben Kingsley!"

The Director rolled his eyes but pressed on.

"So here was a particularly fierce dragon: the British had controlled India's 425 million population by force for almost 200 years, so it must have been hard for an Indian to imagine ever having enough power to kick them out."

"After all, Britain, at the time, was the most powerful empire the world had ever seen."
"A quarter of the globe coloured pink," added Faye for extra detail.
"Indeed," agreed the Director. "And they were brutal bastards who showed no mercy when they needed to suppress the locals."
"In the end, though, Gandhi proved that if you inspire enough people to commit non-violent acts of disobedience, even the most powerful dragons can be sent packing."
"Go, Gandhi!" said George with all the enthusiasm he could still muster.
"What's great about this is that Gandhi achieved emancipation without bloodshed. He knew the British were vicious when it came to suppressing uprisings, but he also knew they would have no idea how to deal with a strategy of passive-aggressive non-cooperation. After all, there's only so many innocents you can murder before the tide of opinion turns against you."
"*The Overton Window*," noted Faye.
"That's right," agreed the Director. "So Gandhi and his followers slowly strangled the enemy to death like a python killing a goat."
"Nice," agreed George appreciatively, vaguely thinking about eating a goat curry on his flight back to LA.
"First, he refused to pay tax on salt," continued the Director.
"Again, with the salt?" asked George, sounding a lot like Woody Allen.
"Yep, salt!" confirmed the Director. "The British taxed the Indians for using salt. SALT, for God's sake! Gandhi said, 'Enough of this bullshit,' and walked 200 miles to the Indian Ocean to get his own salt, thank you very much. In 1930, Mahatma Gandhi set off on his *Salt March* [8] with 80 supporters. By the time he'd reached the sea, he was at the head of a massive crowd. The British

[8] **https://thenonviolenceproject.wisc.edu/** - A Pinch of Salt and the One of the Largest Nonviolence Movements in India: The Salt March of 1930

arrested 60,000 of them, and Gandhi went to prison for two years—but this only made his followers even more determined.

"Next, hundreds of thousands of Indian civil servants put down their pens and refused to work, causing the whole Raj to grind to a halt. And then, in an act that very much mirrors the sort of consumer boycotts I'm suggesting we use to stop climate change, the Indians stopped buying imported British goods—and this hit the London imperialists where it hurts.

"So the *yen* really is mightier than the sword!" exclaimed George joyfully.

"They use rupees in India," corrected Faye, matter-of-factly.

"But never let the details get in the way of a good pun," consoled the Director, patting his tipsy leading man on the back. "But, yes—money is the quickest way to make a capitalist change his mind, if that's what you mean.

"And there's a beautiful irony here: the British had been shipping Indian cotton to Northern England and Scotland for over a century, and then selling it back to the Indians as *paisley saris* and *pyjamas*. The Indians were literally a captive market. So when this cosy arrangement abruptly dried up, it left a gaping hole in Britain's balance of trade—and that made all the difference. It's without doubt the quickest way to get a capitalist's attention.

"Gandhi called this strategy *Satyagraha* [9], which, translated, means *truth force*—and I think that's an excellent description because that's precisely what it was: the force of a people driven by a glaring truth. In this case, the truth that Britain had no right to force its will upon the people of India.

"And *truth force* is precisely how we'll stop capitalism from decimating our planet. Once we see the real truth of what's happening and realise it's down to our cultish belief in capitalism, we'll find the solution.

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[9] **Satyagraha** is a term coined by Mahatma Gandhi, describes nonviolent resistance and civil disobedience rooted in truth and moral force. It embodies Gandhi's philosophy of peaceful resistance against injustice and oppression and advocates for the transformation of society through passive resistance, moral persuasion, and the willingness to endure suffering for the sake of a just cause. **Gandhian philosophy of Satyagraha** www.mkgandhi.org

We can learn a lot more from Gandhi's strategy of *Satyagraha*, but I think we might all be asleep if I talked about it for much longer."
"Not at all," mumbled George, trying to keep his eyes open.

8.2. I Can See Clearly Now

The Director was aware that at least 50 per cent of his audience might soon slip into an alcohol-induced coma, so he knew he had to inject more energy into the conversation.
"And if you think these examples were all a long time ago and far away—and that nothing much ever changes—let me tell you, nothing could be further from the truth."
"Like what? Give me a modern example," requested Faye, keen to hear something more up-to-date to inspire her.
"Fine," said the Director, accepting the challenge. "Who could have imagined the world would come to a standstill in 2020 when Covid struck? Governments were paralysed—until, astonishingly, we made the decision to pause the global capitalist machine and paid people to stay home instead. Even now, it feels surreal.
"For a brief moment, we saw the fragility of capitalism laid bare and tapped into the immense strength of society, prioritising care for the most vulnerable instead. And guess what? The sky didn’t fall in. And then, as if it were all just a dream, we returned to business as usual."
"Many capitalist countries had to implement massive social programmes just to keep people and businesses alive, walking away from their right-wing principles of *laissez-faire* economics. It was a stunning example of how we mindlessly comply with the false belief that capitalism is the only way.
"Moreover, it allowed many of us to step back from the daily grind and rethink our priorities, leading to a sharp rise in early retirement and the

economically inactive, which is just a technical term for *dropping out* like a 1960s hippie.

"And just like the financial crash of 2008—when governments were forced to bail out the banks through Quantitative Easing [10] (just another name for printing money)—the myth of capitalism was laid bare, leaving the politicians, economists, financiers and CEOs looking exactly like the Wizard of Oz, pulling fake levers and wheels while telling us not to look behind the curtain."

"Exactly!" said Faye, in complete and profound agreement.

"And the fallout from those crazy times has been interesting. Some companies have adopted a four-day work week, claiming it increases productivity, employee satisfaction and work-life balance. For example, the average workweek in the Netherlands is now around 29 hours—yet the Netherlands remains more productive per person than either the UK or the US.

"So, things *can* change quickly if we allow them to—and things *will* need to change much quicker than they have so far if we want to stay alive.

"We'll have to look deeper into what we value in life and what motivates us," insisted the Director, with a look of evangelical zeal in his pale blue, though now rather sleepy, eyes. "We've got to see that this irrational urge to fulfil our selfish needs must give way to a more powerful desire for mutual cooperation to drive us forward. When enough of us see beyond capitalism's constraints, we can change the world."

"Hear, hear!" said Faye.

"Well said," agreed George, clapping his hands a little.

"I say we start with a campaign for more mutuals and cooperatives and take it from there. And if you want even more up-to-date examples of humanity

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[10] **Quantitative Easing (QE)** — referred to earlier in the book — but added again, in case you've forgotten — involves buying 'bonds' (in the UK known as 'gilts') which are a form of 'IOU'. Between 2009 and 2020, the Bank of England bought £895 billion worth of bonds using money it created digitally (from what it called 'central bank reserves') in order to stimulate the economy. This undoubtedly benefitted asset owners and investors more than savers or wage earners. **What is quantitative easing? www.bankofengland.co.uk**

triumphing over capitalism, maybe read Rutger Bregman's book *Humankind: A Hopeful History* [11], which challenges the assumption that our species is inherently selfish and violent.

There are hundreds of books on the subject once you start looking, which might make you suspect that—up to now—you haven't been told the whole story. So when you're on your plane tomorrow, George, fire up your iPad and look up *Doughnut Economics* or search for terms like *post-growth*, *sustainable degrowth*, *economic contraction*, *voluntary simplicity*, *prosperity without growth*, *anti-consumerism*, or *post-consumerism*. Then maybe take a closer look at the alternative economics section of your local bookstore—you'll find books on *regenerative economics*, *circular economics*, *sustainable economics*, *holistic economics*, *thriving earth economics*, *ecocentric economics*, *resilient economics*, *well-being economics*, or *equitable economics*." [12]

The Director gulped a lungful of air, as though he'd just rattled off all 52 states of America in one breath.

"Then there are dozens—if not hundreds—of groups, organisations, and local community chapters working to spread the word. Once you start engaging with these ideas, I guarantee you'll be amazed at how much is happening away from the headlines. And I'm pretty sure the organisers of these groups would love it if a famous face like yours got involved."

George nodded and tried to look engaged.

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[11] **Humankind: A Hopeful History" by Rutger Bregman** challenges conventional beliefs about the inherent selfishness and aggression of humanity. Bregman argues that humans are fundamentally compassionate, cooperative, and inclined towards kindness and presents evidence from various contexts, including historical events, psychological studies, and real-life examples, to support this thesis. Bregman invites readers to embrace a more optimistic vision of the future based on the innate goodness of humankind.
www.waterstones.com (n.b. for obvious reasons I'm not providing links to Amazon)

[12] If you think I'm going to list all of these examples here, you're wrong. If you care about this stuff, do your own bloody homework. However, a good place to start would be the following: **New Economic Schools of Thought — a concise overview** by Renilde Becqué **www.medium.com**

"Bregman also wrote a book in 2016 called *Utopia for Realists* [13], which discusses specific policies such as *Universal Basic Income*, *Open Borders*, and a *15-hour work week*. All of these things become possible once we look beyond the false assumptions capitalism throws up to protect itself."

"What I wouldn't do for a 15-hour work week," mused Faye. "Imagine what I could achieve if I didn't have to stand behind this bar eight hours a night!"

"Well, you wouldn't have met us," teased George.

"But you're right," agreed the Director. "Bregman wants us to be audacious in our aspirations. We only live once and ought to demand a kinder, more sustainable world to spend it in. But it's hard because we're so programmed to think that ideas like this are silly fantasies that could never work. And that's exactly what the GRiFTers want you to think. But these ideas may not be quite so crazy—if we just took a risk and tried them."

Both Faye and George nodded solemnly.

"Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast," said the White Queen," smiled Faye.

"Quite so!" agreed the Director. "And an increasing number of thinkers, politicians, and economists agree with Bregman. But you've probably never heard of them."

"Could that perhaps be because of the hegemony?" asked George sarcastically.

"The hegemony," confirmed the Director, nodding.

"We find it hard to think outside the box, so we don't bother. It's too much like hard work."

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[13] **"Utopia for Realists" by Rutger Bregman** (2017) explores bold and practical ideas which challenge conventional wisdom and argues for ambitious policy changes, such as universal basic income, a shorter workweek, and open borders. Bregman asks us to re—image a society based on progressive policies which prioritise human well—being and equality, building towards a more just and prosperous world for all. **www.waterstones.com**

Utopia for Realists: And How We Can Get There by Rutger Bregman – review
www.theguardian.com

At this moment, something snapped in Faye's head. She'd decided she'd heard enough and that it was time to speak up and support the Director's ideas.

"Back in the day, I bet thousands of would-be hummingbirds hated the *slave trade* but did nothing about it because it seemed too powerful to stop. The same was true of the would-be hummingbirds who believed every adult in Britain should have a vote, but they stayed silent for the same reason."

Fortunately, there were still enough hummingbirds idealistic enough to try to change things, even if they couldn't be sure they'd make a difference. But because of their actions, they eventually shifted the *Overton Window* and changed history and the way the world worked.

"So true," agreed the Director, proud of what he'd just heard.

"But what difference can one person make?" asked eight billion individuals, concluded Faye solemnly.

"Precisely!" agreed the Director. "And if we all begin to speak out and act on our beliefs, we'll soon see that—just like the *slave trade*—capitalism isn't a decent way for a civilised and intelligent species such as ours to behave."

8.3. Do You Realise...?

"OK, OK, OK!" slurred George. "You've convinced me. I'm a hummingbird, ready to join a *Satyagraha*—or whatever that Gandhi thing was called. Sign me up! But what do you want me to do now? What's the post-capitalist equivalent of melting down my pots and pans or going on a *Salt March*?"

"George," replied the Director in a calming tone, "I'm not going to spoon-feed you or hand you a shopping list. This is where you begin educating yourself, researching and discovering actions that satisfy your conscience. I'm just delighted I seem to have lit a fire under you—that makes me happier than you can imagine."

"And it makes me happy that you're happy," added George sleepily, now patting the front of the Director's chest with his big, floppy hand.
"I'm not asking you to slavishly follow a programme. This is definitely intended to be more of a thought-starter than a manifesto. Marx wrote a manifesto, but even he didn't think a classless society would come about just by joining a big club and following orders. Lenin and Trotsky tried it, and look how that turned out."
"Marx didn't want to be part of a club that would have him as a member," joked Faye, pleased with herself.
"Very good!" acknowledged the Director. "And you're right—that's exactly what he meant. Marx knew that a revolution imposed from the top down would never work. It had to be bottom-up and organic, much like Gandhi's strategy: mass disobedience, labour strikes, and boycotting the products that feed the capitalist dragon. That's what we need now. Marx called for a withdrawal of labour; I'm calling for a withdrawal of consumption. Stop feeding the dragon, and its power will fade. The revolution won't come from beheading the GRiFTers but from seven billion hummingbirds refusing to play their game."
"Wow!" gasped George, captivated by the imagery.
"If we refuse to accept this selfish, destructive brand of capitalism, we can start to shift the Overton Window. If we acted at a global level in the way we behave locally, the world would be transformed. For you, George, that might mean auctioning off a couple of your Porsches for charity and using part of your Beverly Hills estate to grow vegetables. But the single biggest impact starts with our diet—we need to drastically cut down on our meat and fish consumption. Better yet, become a vegetarian."
"Or a vegan!" interjected Faye with a hint of pride. "I haven't eaten an egg since 2002!"
George rolled his eyes and joked, "How can you tell if someone's a vegan?"

"Because they'll tell you," finished the Director, giving Faye a light nudge in the arm. "But seriously, beyond the horrific cruelty to animals, our fixation on meat is wrecking our ecosystems, turning the rainforests—the planet's lungs—into barren monocultures. "…the planet's lungs—into barren monocultures. As David Attenborough put it, *'The world simply cannot sustain billions of meat-eaters.*[14] If we want to survive, we urgently need to recalibrate our relationship with nature."

This was sobering for George, still savouring the steak he'd only recently devoured. The Director had touched on something he'd mulled over before: he doubted he could eat meat if he had to slaughter the animal himself. So why was he OK with paying someone else to do it? And he suddenly realised this habit was also helping to destroy the planet. Even through the haze of alcohol, he knew this couldn't go on.

"And while you're at it," continued the Director, "you could maybe stop enriching GRiFTer retailers like Amazon, which don't pay their taxes and don't pay their workers properly, and start shopping at cooperatives and worker-owned enterprises where employees have a stake in the business.

"And is it true that you part-own a soccer club in Wales?"

"You're correct," confirmed George, pretending to head a football.

"Well, how about widening the club's purpose beyond profit? Focus on community initiatives—getting kids off the streets and setting up academies and apprenticeships. God knows North Wales could use it."

George nodded meekly.

"You could also instruct your financial adviser to move all your savings out of dodgy pension funds and GRiFTer investments and into initiatives that are 100% ethical."

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[14] **www.animalagriculturereclimatechange.org/** Sir David Attenborough wants us to change our diets to save the planet

George rubbed his chin, contemplating these drastic suggestions. In doing so, he inadvertently flashed the ostentatious watch strapped to his wrist.

"And maybe stop being sponsored by *Richard Mille*. Who needs a half-million-dollar watch anyway?"

"I've got another one at home worth a million," George admitted sheepishly. "In my defence, it came with the job."

The Director gave him a comical, slightly disappointed look. "At least donate your fee to saving the rainforest or something. And if you find their business model involves child labour or anything shady, refuse to work with them."

"Good advice," agreed George. "I'll look into it when I get home and maybe ask some awkward questions."

"Attaboy!" The Director grinned. "You'll still be a celebrity—but maybe more Jimmy Wales on Wikipedia than Mark Zuckerberg on Facebook. And I know who I'd prefer to have a beer with.

"In general, we all need to be far more aware of how GRiFTers operate and how they make their profits. We could develop a type of kite mark certification to legally force a business to explain who owns them and how they're financed. That way, we could better choose who to support.

"GRiFTer organisations would prefer you not to know how they operate because they're just parasites, and we're their hosts. Their sole purpose is to siphon off our cash into offshore bank accounts—none of which helps us or the planet we live on."

"I'll bear all of this in mind," assured George, still trying to hide his disappointment at the thought of saying goodbye to his beloved *Porsche*.

"I see you're still thinking about your cars, George."

"No, no, not at all," replied George, lying.

"But imagine a world where success isn't measured by the car you drive, but by knowing things are getting better for everyone—not just the privileged few."

George nodded in agreement and then quoted from his favourite book again:
Where you live,' the little prince said, 'people grow five thousand roses in one garden ... yet they don't find what they are looking for." [15]
"Beautifully put," the Director complimented. "Now imagine turning on the news and seeing stories about rainforests coming back to life, endangered species being saved and thriving, and real progress in reducing poverty and improving healthcare in Africa. What's that worth to you?"
"A lot," admitted George.
"Imagine if we became as intolerant of greed and selfishness in public life as we are in our private lives. Imagine unrestrained capitalism becoming so unacceptable that oligarchs, dictators, and GRiFTer corporations could no longer hoard their stolen money in Swiss banks. Perhaps then, those failed states could rebuild and let their citizens feed and house themselves, rather than depend on foreign aid.
"Imagine a world where innovation focused on sustainable solutions rather than oil spills; where quality triumphed over quantity; where long-term well-being was seen as a more important goal than short-term profits. What sort of world would that be like to live in?"
"A pretty good one," conceded George.
"It's all there waiting for us—if we can just find the courage to turn our backs on the GRiFTers and their dragon economy. Without them in charge, we could steer our ship into calmer waters, where our pale blue dot is loved and cherished.
"That's what an intelligent species would do—and despite all evidence to the contrary, I believe we are an intelligent species. We can do it. We just need to STOP BEING SO FUCKING STUPID!"
The Director banged his palm down on the bar as he said this.

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[15] **The Best Quotes From *The Little Prince* — www.bustle.com**

"I don't know about you, but I want to live in a world that celebrates the best of humanity, not one that parades our worst traits on television every night. Breaking free from the grip of unchecked capitalism doesn't mean losing our individuality. On the contrary, escaping this capitalist straitjacket could help us unlock our true individual potential. We could build a new system that reflects who we are at our core—one where we live more authentically, feel less judged or constrained, and aren't constantly haunted by the fear of an environmental catastrophe looming over us."

"Imagine if we were all *self-actualised* [16], George—free to explore our full potential and talents. How much greater would our lives be if we didn't measure status by the watch we wear, the car we drive, or the weekly session with our shrink trying to straighten us out?"

"I know exactly what you're talking about," confirmed George, realising the Director was now describing the three exciting years he'd spent at drama college, when he felt everything was possible. "That was Lee Strasberg's philosophy," he said. "When I was at the Actors Studio in New York, we called it Flow. If you're a method actor, you can glimpse what a fully expressed life looks like when you get deep inside a character."

"Exactly!" agreed the Director enthusiastically—although he wasn't quite sure George was what you'd call a *method* actor.

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[16] **Self-Actualisation** is a concept introduced by psychologist Abraham Maslow, which describes a state of fulfilment, authenticity, and personal growth. A self-actualised individual has achieved a deep understanding of themselves, their values, and their purpose in life, allowing them to live in alignment with their true selves and pursue meaningful goals. They serve as inspirations for others, demonstrating the transformative power of personal growth and the pursuit of authenticity and meaning in life.
Self-Actualisation In Psychology: Theory & Examples www.simplypsychology.org

"The problem is, I've probably only been in a state of 'flow' [17] five times my whole life, those moments when I've been 100 per cent present. And I certainly haven't felt that way for the past fifteen years."
"Well, maybe it's time to give it another shot," said the Director encouragingly. "This might be the moment you stop trying to be a film star and start being a human being again."
"You're probably right," agreed George, reflecting on his last few supposedly successful years.
"You see, George, we aren't designed to be selfish. We're deeply spiritual creatures, striving to be the best we can be—sharing this incredible miracle of life with the fellow souls around us.
As Jeremy Honey said;
It's when we recognise the reality around us for what it is, rather than what we expect it to be. Intimacy happens when we remove our preconceived ideas and allow our souls to be in the company of one another." [18]
"That's great," said Faye, returning to the conversation after spending a few minutes tidying up the bar and getting ready to close. "But who's Jeremy Honey?"
"A friend of a friend," replied the Director. "But that's not important now. What is important is that we've reached the end of the cul-de-sac of capitalism we've trapped ourselves in. Some of us have grown rich, many more remain poor, and almost all of us have lost sight of how to enjoy life. It's caused wars, famine, and vast amounts of suffering—and it's destroying our planet. How can we continue to support that?

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[17] In the state of **Flow**, individuals experience a state of optimal experience, intense concentration, heightened awareness, and a sense of timelessness, losing themselves in the present moment and deep enjoyment and satisfaction.
What is a flow state and what are its benefits? www.headspace.com

[18] **Jeremy Honey** "Ensemble" magazine 2023 Rude Mechanical Press

Within this hall of distorting mirrors, it might seem pretentious or naive to aspire to anything as grand as a happy, healthy, caring world, but that's just the *hegemony* talking. Capitalism has even taken away our ability to be optimistic.
George and Faye looked at each other, touched by the words tumbling from the Director's mouth.
"If you think about it, just for a moment, you'd realise it's a miracle the three of us are sitting in this garish bar at two-thirty in the morning. If we dollied the camera back, we'd see our pale blue dot floating in infinite blackness, unsure where we've come from or where we're going. It's a magnificent mystery, and I'm damn sure I'm not going to waste whatever time I've got left indulging in something as crass as chasing profits or being envied for the car I drive."
George and Faye listened to this poetic vision, intoned by the gnarled old Scotsman, his voice mellow as the glass of vintage malt he held.
"Aristotle was saying something similar two and a half thousand years ago," continued the Director. "He called it *Eudaimonia* [19]—his way of describing a life of happiness and fulfilment. He knew a thing or two about the human condition and its unique capacity for rational thought, mixed with the soul's passions. He believed we could all rise above the mundanity of the day-to-day and be present in the transcendent miracle of life.
"Most importantly, he argued that we can only achieve a state of *Eudaimonia* through meaningful relationships. Taoists and Buddhists believe something similar. So if we're going to kick capitalism to the curb and look for

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[19] **Eudaimonia**, from ancient Greek philosophy, represents the highest human good and flourishing achieved through virtuous living and the realisation of one's true potential. Often translated as "happiness" or "well—being," eudaimonia goes beyond mere pleasure and satisfaction to encompass a state of fulfilment and excellence in life. It is achieved through the cultivation of moral virtues such as courage, wisdom, temperance, and justice, along with the pursuit of meaningful goals and activities aligned with one's values and purpose. Eudaimonia involves living in harmony with oneself, others, and the world, fostering a deep sense of inner peace, contentment, and purposeful engagement with life.
What is Eudaimonia? https://positivepsychology.com

something better, let's go the whole hog and see how far we can take it. Let's shoot for the moon, that way, if we miss, we'll still be among the stars."
"Yeah, but then we'll be floating in space, waiting for our oxygen to run out," replied George, staring into his now long-empty glass and somewhat deflating the moment.

8.4. Stand By Me

"Have you ever seen *Pay It Forward*?" [20] Faye asked George.
"Kevin Spacey?" queried George, now almost monosyllabic. "Not his best work."
"That's the one," confirmed Faye.
"Why d'you ask?" enquired the Director, puzzled.
"Oh, I don't know. Talking about that hummingbird made me think of it," replied Faye. "The hummingbird wasn't trying to put out the fire for her own sake, but for all the animals in the jungle—and all the little hummingbirds that would come after her."
"More like *Spray It Forward*, then," said George, remembering the water in the little hummingbird's beak.
"I know what you're getting at," agreed the Director, beginning to see the link. "Tell me more about the film. I don't think they showed it at my local arthouse."
"OK, so from what I can remember, a class of kids are told to come up with an idea that will change the world." Faye made rabbit ears to suggest that *changing the world* was a cliché. "And this one kid suggests that if someone does you a favour, you don't pay them back immediately—you pay it…"

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[20] **Pay it Forwards** (2000) — A young boy attempts to make the world a better place after his teacher gives him that chance. **www.imdb.com**

forward to three new people who, in turn, do something kind for three *more* new people."

"Interesting!" said the Director, appreciating the point being made.

"Thanks for ma[21]king that connection," he said to Faye. "This is an old idea known as *serial reciprocity*."

"Is there nothing you don't know?" wondered George aloud.

"Well, I don't know much about Kevin Bacon films," the Director replied, smiling at George.

"Spacey," corrected George, now on the verge of zoning out completely.

"Benjamin Franklin asked a friend of his to do something similar while living in Paris. I'm paraphrasing, but he said something like:

If I lend you this money, promise me that, instead of paying me back, you'll lend the same amount to someone in similar distress and then ask him to do the same. That way, it will help a lot of people before it reaches a knave that stops its progress. This is a trick of mine to do a deal of good with a little money.

"How the hell do you remember all this stuff?" asked George again, completely baffled.

"I'm not sure," replied the Director. "Maybe it's because I read a lot of Wikipedia pages.

"There have even been experiments looking at the *Pay It Forward* effect, which suggests that people who receive good deeds are more likely to do good deeds themselves. Even small things, like being a courteous driver, encourage other drivers to be courteous, too. It's what they call a *virtuous circle*."

"They haven't driven in LA," reflected George sardonically.

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[21] **https://www.learningtogive.org** - Serial reciprocity is a social and philanthropic concept that defines how individuals indirectly reciprocate charitable acts. Often coined as "paying it forward" or "passing it on."

Ignoring this comment, Faye went on, "It sounds like Karma [22]. You know, Hindus believe our past deeds influence our future."

"You're right," agreed the Director. "I think we could use this idea for our Hummingbird campaign."

"How do you mean?" asked Faye, unsure whether she'd followed the Director's train of thought.

"This reminds me of that old WW1 recruitment poster I told George about earlier."

"Oh yeah!" replied George, vaguely remembering that earlier episode from this encounter with the Director. "The one where the poor dad is morally shamed for being a coward!" *(Here's that poster again for the viewers at home)*.

"That's the one!" chuckled the Director. "But if you think about it, "There's a good idea here we might use to encourage people to do more to save the planet."

"How do you mean?" asked George. "Are we into emotional blackmail and dad-shaming now? Doesn't sound very *Eudaimonia*."

"You're right," agreed the Director again. "But what if we removed the blackmailing and virtue signalling and let people see it for what it is?"

"What's that?" asked Faye, still somewhat unsure.

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[22] **Karma** means "action", a term used in Buddhism to describe the law of cause and effect. It refers to the idea that our actions, thoughts, and words create a ripple effect that influences our future experiences. In other words, the energy we put into the world comes back to us somehow, either in this lifetime or future. **www.zen—buddhism.net**

"People supporting each other in the fight against global warming," responded the Director.

"Dig for victory!" shouted George, vaguely remembering a snatch from an earlier conversation when they'd still been reasonably sober.

"Imagine if we created an online site where people could keep a record of the things they're doing for the war effort? So when children ask their parents what they did in the ten crucial years between 2024 and 2034—when we still had a chance of preventing environmental disaster—they could show their children the *Hummingbird Book* and explain how they'd helped."

"Are you sure?" asked Faye. "Are things really as bad as the First World War, which killed twenty million people?"

"Peanuts," replied the Director dismissively. "The Climate War will kill all eight billion of us if we don't do something about it."

Duly corrected and reminded of the gravity of the situation, Faye asked, "So you'd better tell me about this *Hummingbird Book*."

"OK," agreed the Director. "After the Great War, almost every town and village in Britain built a memorial to the people from that town who'd given their lives for their country. You still see them covered in poppies and wreaths every Remembrance Day."

Faye nodded, appreciating the point being made.

"So why shouldn't we acknowledge the sacrifices people are making in the war against climate change? Sure, you might think that's over the top, but if there were somewhere people could go to record their experiences and share their ideas—such as how to cut down on our carbon footprint, avoid GRiFTer companies, or just stimulate conversation amongst the Eco-Worriers like you and me—that's got to be a good thing. We've got to get this conversation out to a wider audience beyond just the Just Stop Oil and Extinction Rebellion activists. We need this to go mainstream if we have any chance of saving ourselves."

"So let's create an online forum—something like Facebook but without Zuckerberg making money from it—and let's call it *The Hummingbird Book* or something, where people can get inspired, find their own way to do their bit, and feel less like they're on their own."

"This is beginning to sound like a plan," said Faye sotto voce. "Maybe then people wouldn't feel they were the only animal in the forest trying to put out the fire. Even if it feels small, they'd be part of a bigger movement—the *satyagraha*: *Truth Force*."

"Good idea," drawled George. "That way, next time I see my niece, I can show her my page on the website, and she'll see that I'd sold my Porsche and at least know I was trying. She might even be proud of me."

At this, George pretended to weep into his hands.

"Tell you what," he went on, "I'm flying back to LA tomorrow, and I'll give a few of my pals in Silicon Valley a call to see if they can magic something up."

"That would be marvellous!" agreed the Director appreciatively. "I'll call you in a few days to see if you've got anywhere with it."

Even in his present state, George knew the Director would 100 per cent keep his word—and that he had accidentally conscripted himself into the war effort.

8.5. Across The Universe

"That's very noble of you, George," said the Director. "Which reminds me, I read this on Twitter this morning."

The Director pulled out his battered old phone once again and started to read the tweet he'd seen earlier:

"Have you ever thought that, in 100 years, like in 2123, we will all be buried with our relatives and friends? Strangers will live in our homes, we fought so hard to build, and they will own everything we have today. All our possessions will be unknown, including the car we spent a fortune on, and will probably be

scrap. Our descendants will hardly know who we were, nor will they remember us. How many of us know our grandfather's father? After we die, we will be remembered for a few more years, then we are just a portrait on someone's bookshelf, and a few years later, our history, photos and deeds disappear into history's oblivion. We won't even be memories. If we paused one day to analyse these questions, perhaps we would understand how ignorant and weak the dream to achieve it all was. If we could only think about this, our approach and thoughts would change; we would be different people. Always having more and no time for what's really valuable in life. I'd change all this to live and enjoy the walks I've never taken, the hugs I didn't give, the kisses for our children and our loved ones, the jokes we didn't have time for. Those would certainly be the most beautiful moments to remember; afterwards, they would fill our lives with joy. And some of us waste it day after day with greed, selfishness and intolerance. Every minute of life is priceless and will never be repeated, so take time to enjoy, be grateful for, and celebrate your existence." [23]

"Man, that's fucking heavy," reflected Faye, entirely giving up any pretence of being a member of the hotel staff.

The Director looked up from his screen to see George fighting to keep his eyes open. He glanced at his watch—it was 3:30—and he suddenly thought about his wife. Given that it was the end of the shoot, she wouldn't have expected him home tonight, so she'd have gone to bed early. But if she'd woken in the night, she'd probably have wondered where he was and hoped he was OK.

He also remembered he'd arranged to play squash with his assistant at noon, and there was no chance of that happening now. Unfortunately, there was also no chance of sending her a text in his present state, so he hoped she'd forgive him for standing her up.

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[23] Although posted many times on social media, it is not clear or obvious who was the original author.

However, it was time to let George go, as he had a flight to catch in the morning. But the Director had one last point to make.

"So, the last thing I want to leave you with is this..."

George and Faye leaned in one last time to hear this final pearl of wisdom. This might be the most essential piece of the jigsaw they'd listen to tonight.

"Look, you know I'm a sucker for an acronym."

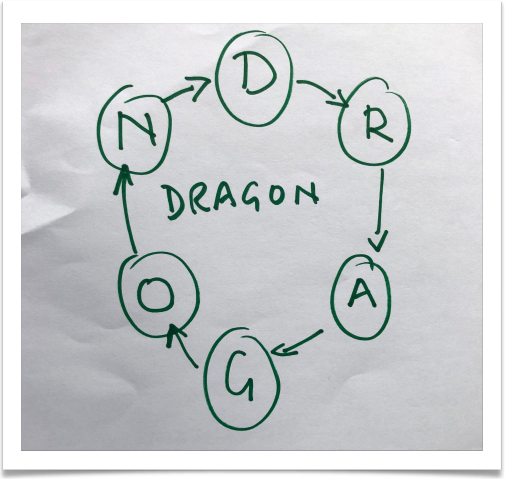
"I had noticed," declared George sarcastically.

"Well, let me leave you with just one more before we all turn in."

"OK," agreed Faye. "Is it memorable?"

"It ought to be," retorted the Director. "Technically, it's a mnemonic, so it's designed to help you remember something important. Could you pass me one of these napkins, please?"

Faye did as requested while the Director felt behind his ear for his pencil. This is what he scribbled:



"Cool. What does it mean?" asked George, swaying a little as he squinted at the paper in the bar's dim lights.

"D — R — A — G — O — N," confirmed the Director.
D — We need to wake up to the **DANGER** that's hanging over us.
R — We need to take **RESPONSIBILITY** — because if we expect someone else to do it on our behalf, we will all die.
A — We must learn to avoid those zombie **GRiFTer** organisations that don't care about our well-being.
G — We've got to practise being more **GRATEFUL** for what we already have — like our health, families, and loved ones. And we've also got to resist being **GREEDY**. There's enough to go around if we all take what we need and nothing more. This leads to the idea of **BUY LESS / BUY BETTER**, but I couldn't fit that into the mnemonic!
O — We need to learn to look out for each **OTHER**. We are all in this together, and that's where we'll find meaning in our lives.
N — Finally, we must take care of **NATURE** because if nature dies, we all die.
The Director now leaned in, his face very close to those of his friends, and jabbed his finger at them a little to emphasise the point as he now said very slowly and deliberately. "***DON'T — FEED — THE — DRAGON.*** Remember this: the Dragon lives out there in the big, bad capitalist world, but never forget it also lives here, in our greedy little hearts. So, whatever we do, we must remember it's not enough to blame others. We're as much a part of the problem as they are because we keep feeding them."
And then, with an almost nonchalant smile, the Director drained the last tiny drop of whisky from his glass.

8.6. When Tomorrow Comes

"Come on, George," said the Director, tapping George's leg. "Let's get you off to bed. I'll walk you to the elevator."

"Thank you so much," replied George, genuinely grateful for the time the Director had devoted to him over the past nine hours — but now fast heading into oblivion. "I understand now, and I see things differently. Hopefully, I'll want to make some changes when I wake up tomorrow. It's time to be more *Hummingbird*."

"That's great," smiled the Director, again suddenly conscious that George was just an eager puppy.

Faye and the Director shook hands in mutual recognition of a fellow traveller — their hands bridging the age gap and the social distance between them. The Director fumbled in his battered old wallet for whatever notes were inside and left them on the bar, before helping George from his stool. He also pushed the napkin he'd just been scribbling on towards Faye, motioning for her to keep it.

George waved a weary hand at Faye, then slid from his chair, only prevented from slumping to the floor by the Director's surprisingly muscular arm.

"I'll make sure we get you to the premiere," was the Director's farewell line to Faye, shouted over his shoulder as he helped George to the door.

Faye shook her head, glanced briefly at the napkin, smiled, and returned to closing the bar. She never received a proper explanation for the Dragon, but she guessed she'd find out if she ever saw the movie.

In the bright lobby, the Director guided George to the bank of gold elevators tucked away to the side. No one was around at this hour, so he pressed the button to call one down. As they waited, the Director wondered whether humans could make it through this critical point in history. Perhaps, he speculated, we had more in common with lemmings than we liked to admit.

With this in mind, he reached for his phone again, held it near his chin, and spoke into it. "Siri, do lemmings commit mass suicide?"

Siri instantly responded: "Lemmings are small rodents known for their periodic population fluctuations and migratory behaviour. Sometimes, during migration, they accidentally fall from cliffs or into bodies of water, leading to the misconception of mass suicide. In reality, lemmings don't intentionally take their lives."

Relieved to hear it was just a myth, the Director returned the phone to his pocket and pressed the elevator button again, irritated by the delay.

"So, no," the Director continued out loud, now almost certainly speaking to himself, "it would be unnatural for a species like humans to kill itself… but thanks to our hubris, we just might. Still, I'm counting on our *Collective Unconscious* and the miracle of *Spontaneous Order* to wake us up before that happens. This is one alarm we can't afford to sleep through."

George was no longer listening. He was leaning against the wall, entirely focused on not falling over.

"There's just one last thing I want to reiterate," persisted the Director, knowing George was now probably too far gone, but saying it anyway. "The first and last thing we'll need to save ourselves is TRUST."

George pulled a face he hoped would suggest he understood.

"When you wake up tomorrow, George, and try to remember what we were talking about, you'll have to TRUST yourself that what I've been saying makes sense. You'll need to TRUST yourself, because from now on, everything in this world will try to make you doubt it."

George nodded excessively.

"And what's more," continued the Director, "despite everything I've said about the human heart's temptation to be selfish, you'll have to learn to TRUST everybody else too. Because if we want any chance of building a new world out of the wreckage of the old one, we will have to work together. And that

means our biggest enemy will be the fear that others will take advantage of us."

Again, George nodded, hoping the elevator would arrive before he threw up on the carpet.

"So everything depends on our willingness to TRUST the process—especially when all our instincts tell us to distrust it. We'd rather retreat under the duvet and avoid taking risks, but we can't afford to do that if we want to live."

Of course, retreating under a duvet was exactly what George wanted to do at that precise moment. Still, he could tell from the Director's face that this was important information he was supposed to hear.

Much to George's relief, there was a bright *ping*, and the elevator doors quietly swooshed open.

"But that's a conversation for another day," conceded the Director, finally acknowledging the moment had passed and throwing in the towel.

"By the way, George!" said the Director, as though he'd just remembered something. "TRUST is the subject of my next film, and I was hoping you might consider taking the lead. Most of it will be filmed in Bhutan."

George hadn't entirely understood what the Director had said, but it sounded like a job offer. "Sounds great!" he replied, covering his bases. "Contact my agent, and let's work something out."

"Here you go, my young friend," said the Director, guiding George into the empty elevator. "You did remarkably well today, George — and thank you for your thoughtful contributions."

George patted the Director on the shoulder as he shuffled inside, while the Director leaned in to press the floor number from George's key card.

"Safe journey back. I'll call you next week."

The elevator doors closed, and George was left alone, vaguely wondering why the Director had kept calling him George all evening, when his name was Brad.

As the Director gazed at his weary reflection in the closed elevator door, a spark of hope ignited, and he allowed himself a moment to believe that the ideas he'd shared might take root in George's heart. He smiled, stepped back into the lobby, and wanted unsteadily out through the main doors into the cool, early morning air.

The sky was clear, with a hint of orange in the east, announcing either the first glow of dawn, that, or the light pollution from London's Square Mile that never dimmed. He couldn't quite tell which.

Looking up, the Director was struck by the vast expanse of the night sky — a tapestry of stars sparkling like scattered diamond dust on black velvet. In that moment, he couldn't help but wonder if his generation might be the last to witness this awe-inspiring sight.

Just then, the cab, which had been patiently waiting, pulled up.

Grateful for his patience, the Director smiled at the turbaned driver, who smiled back serenely. He opened the car door, climbed into the rear seat, confirmed his address, and settled back for the short ride home. Just before closing his eyes, he noticed a small laminated card sellotaped to the driver's dashboard, which he recognised as a Taoist saying:

In the harmony of the universe,
Every action ripples through the whole.

The Director smiled at this, thanked the universe, and then — in a blatant, ironic, post-modern twist — looked directly into the camera lens and said to you, the reader:

So, tell me, little Hummingbird… what are you going to do about it?

That said, he rested his head against the car seat as it gently pulled away.

Thanks for reading!

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About Gramskii

Hi, I'm Graham/*Gramskii* - an appropriate pen name for this book.
I worked in marketing for 30 years, flying around the world, feeling important. Eventually, my wife and I grew tired of that lifestyle, so we grabbed the kids, left Manhattan, and decamped to the soggy green hills of Somerset. It's prettier here, and while it doesn't pay as much as Madison Avenue… who cares? (OK, me — a little, but you can't have everything.)
But even after the move, something still felt off, and I slowly realised it had to do with climate change. So I did some research and wrote this book, in which I try to explain what ordinary folk like you and me can do about it.
I've attempted to make it amusing, to break up the boring and depressing bits because let's face it: if we didn't laugh, we'd cry, and no one wants to read a book that makes them depressed. Which is half the problem.
I also criticise Big Tech in this book for making things much worse — so I could hardly then try to sell it on Amazon. In any case, the object isn't to make money. It's just that, as a hummingbird, I want to *do my bit*.
You can also download this book for free at www.dragonbook.org.

Finally, if you enjoyed *The Dragon and the Hummingbird*, and you think you know someone who might like to read it, then please spread the word. If you don't, please keep your mouth shut :-)

Peace, love, etc.

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The Dragon & The Hummingbird

- A not-for-profit allegory for our times -

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